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AFTER THE
MANNER OF MEN

FRANCIS LYNDE



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AFTER THE MANNER OF MEN

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**“Did you really think that some one was shooting
at you?”**

(Page 7.)

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

DEPARTMENT OF CHEMISTRY

PHYSICAL CHEMISTRY

LECTURE NOTES

BY

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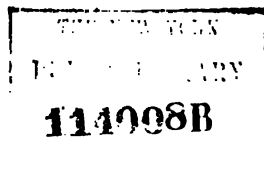
After the Manner of Men

BY
FRANCIS LYNDE

ILLUSTRATED BY
ARTHUR E. BECHER

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
NEW YORK ::::::::::: 1916

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TO
JOSEPH FRATER,

LOYAL FRIEND OF MANY YEARS,
TO WHOM MUCH OF THE MATERIAL AND ALL OF THE
ATMOSPHERE OF THE STORY IS OWING
THIS BOOK

IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED,
WITH GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENTS FROM
THE AUTHOR

✓101

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I

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COINCIDENT with a miniature thunderclap shattering the summer afternoon silence of the mountain forest a bullet whipped through the foliage, leaving a half-severed twig to flutter and dangle within easy arm's reach. Tregarvon had never before been under fire, and he was a product of twentieth-century civilization and the cities. Yet his colonial ancestor, figuring as a seasoned Indian fighter in Braddock's disaster, could scarcely have picked his sheltering tree with better judgment or dropped behind it with more mechanical celerity.

"Great Peter!" he exclaimed, under his breath, struggling to draw the pocket-entangled weapon which he had persuaded himself to add to his impedimenta before leaving Philadelphia, under the impression that it would be a necessary part of a land-looker's equipment in the Tennessee mountains; "Great Pete——"

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The pocket yielded with a sound of tearing cloth, and the first shock of panic subsided. Crouching behind his tree, the Philadelphian twirled the cylinder of the revolver to make sure that all the chambers were filled. While he was doing this there was another report, and this time the bullet scored the sheltering oak. Tregarvon edged himself into position, with due regard for the enemy's line of fire, and cocked his weapon, not, however, with any reassuring confidence in it, or in his own steadiness of nerve.

Peering judiciously around the buttressing knees of the barricade oak, he could see nothing save a matted tangle of briers, blackberry bushes, and laurel. But being the possessor of a fairly active imagination, he fancied he could see more—the sunlight reflecting from the polished barrel of a rifle, for example, and, by another turn of the imaginative screw, the indistinct figure of his assailant far back among the trees.

While he was thus reconnoitring, a third shot ripped through the screening laurel and clicked spitefully into his oak. Since the click came first, with the report a fraction of a second later, he reserved his fire. It was evident that the hidden marksman was well beyond pistol range, and he decided to save his ammunition against a time

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when it might stand a chance of being more effective. The target-practice part of his education had been neglected, and he especially distrusted his marksmanship with the nickel-plated house weapon, the more since he had never as yet fired it.

Harboring this distrust, he was content for the moment to make himself small behind his tree, sitting between two of the flanking root buttresses with his back against the barrier trunk, and wincing in spite of himself while other bullets, following now in rapid and measured succession, whined to right or left, or buried themselves in the solid wood. Oddly enough, the misses, though he could feel the wind of them on either side, were less disquieting than the hits. At each impact of lead against wood there was a jarring little shock quite thrillingly transmissible to quick-set nerves in sympathetic contact with the other side of the target.

"By Jove! if Elizabeth could only see me now!" he chuckled broadly; "Elizabeth, or the *mutterchen*, or even my rough-riding little sister! This fusillading miscreant of mine must be one of the McNabb outlaws, trying in his elemental fashion to settle the old feud about our title to the coal lands. By and by, I suppose— Whew!"

The spine-tingling thrill was so real this time

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that he was half minded to look and see if the impacting bullet had not come all the way through the tree to bulge the bark on his side of it. But he restrained the prompting and went on talking to himself.

“By and by, I suppose, he’ll get tired of blazing away at a safe distance and come charging down upon me. Then I shall be most unhappily obliged to kill him; which will be about the crassest misfortune that could happen, next to his killing me. Confound their barbarous feuds, anyway! Why can’t these out-of-date mountain people wake up and realize that they are living in the twentieth century of civilization and Christian enlightenment? That’s what I’d like to know!”

The only reply to this very reasonable query being the vicious “ping” of another rifle-bullet, he went on discontentedly.

“As if matters were not hopeless enough without adding a scrap with these silly mountaineers about the land titles! Everything torn up at home, the family anchor pulled out by the roots in the steel merger, two women to be taken care of—with Elizabeth presently to make a third—and nothing to make good on but this failure of a Cumberland Mountain coal mine! And now,

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before I've had time to turn around, the spirit moves this rifle-popping moonshine-maker to turn his grouch loose until I feel it in my bones that I shall have to kill him to make him quit!"

Then, the *zip-zip* of the bullets beginning again after a momentary pause, the soliloquy went on: "That's right; keep it up, you pin-headed barbarian! I've got you for an excuse to commit manslaughter—that's the surest thing there is. Which brings on more talk. I wonder how it feels to kill a man? I'd give all my old shoes if I didn't have to find out experimentally. Then there is Elizabeth: it is two completed generations back to her Quaker forepeople, but she is quite capable of flatly refusing to marry what they would have stigmatized as 'a man of blood.' Say, you bloodthirsty assassin—that was an uncomfortably near one!"

After the glancing shot, which had flicked a handful of bark chips into Tregarvon's lap, the firing ceased. Assuring himself that the battling moment at short range was approaching, the young man from the North sat tight, gripping the house pistol in nervous anticipation, and listening tensely for the sound of advancing footfalls.

The suspense was short. Some one, several

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persons, as it presently appeared, were pushing through the tangle of low-hanging undergrowth toward the oak-tree. Tregarvon wondered that there should be no attempt cautionary on the part of the enemy; wondered again, this time with nettle pricklings of foolishness, when a voice, cheerfully exultant and unmistakably feminine, cried out close at hand.

"Oh, you people—come here and see! I *did* hit it—*lots* of times; not that trifling little sheet of paper, of course"—scornfully—"but the tree, I mean. Just come and— *Ec-e-ow!*"

The shrill little scream of surprise and alarm was for Mr. Vance Tregarvon, issuing cautiously from behind the bulwark oak, still mystified, and still absently gripping the pistol.

The Philadelphian found himself confronting a young woman gowned in stone-blue linen, and wearing an embroidery hat to match, the hat shading a face too unaffectedly winsome to be called beautiful, perhaps, but yet the most piquant and expressive face he had ever looked upon. This young woman was carrying a target-rifle; and pinned upon the bullet-punctured side of the oak was the square of white paper at which she had evidently been shooting.

There were others coming up to join the pretty

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markswoman: a lean-faced, mild-eyed, spectacled gentleman of middle age, whose coat suggested the church or the schoolroom; a vivacious lady in black, with strongly marked eyebrows and eloquent hands and shoulders; a young woman who wore an artist's smock over her walking-gown; and another who was girlish enough to wear a red tam, and to be the prettier for it. But by preference Tregarvon made his stammering apologies to the blue embroidery hat.

"Ah—er—please don't mind me," he begged, acutely conscious that his abrupt and pistol-bearing entrance was handicapping him prodigiously. "I thought—that is—er—you see, I really couldn't know that it was merely a peaceful target practice, and I——"

"Of all things!" gasped the young woman, her slate-blue eyes emphasizing her shocked amazement. "Did you really think that some one was shooting at *you*? But, of course, you must have! How perfectly dreadful!"

Tregarvon was trying ineffectually to hide the ornamental revolver in his coat pocket when the others closed in.

"You are sure you are not hurt?" the mild-eyed escort made haste to inquire, and Tregarvon grinned sheepishly.

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"Only in my self-esteem," he confessed. "I was silly enough to think that somebody was trying to mark me down, though I might have known better after the first shot or two."

"But how could you know when you were behind the tree and couldn't see us?" protested the one who had been doing the shooting. "I'm sure it speaks libraries for your self-control that you didn't retaliate in kind! Don't you think so, Madame Fortier?" and she appealed to the lady with the Gallic eyebrows and the eloquent shoulders.

"*Ciel!* but the *sang-froid*—what you call the cold blood—of these American zhentlemen is of a grandeur the moz' magnificent!" exclaimed madame. "Mees Richardia she is shoot a hundred time at zis zhentleman, and he is say he is injure' onlee in hees *amour-propre!*"

It was at this point that the humor of the situation overtook the chief offender, and she laughed, the sweetest and most delectable laugh that ever gladdened the ears of a young man keenly sensitive to the charms of heavenly slate-blue eyes, a piquant face, and a voice remindful of wood-thrushes and song-sparrows and golden-throated warblers.

"After this, there is nothing left for us but to

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declare ourselves," she submitted ruefully, turning to the spectacled escort. "It is the least we can do to save the gentleman the trouble of describing us if he wishes to have us taken before Squire Prigmore."

But now Tregarvon was regaining some measure of equanimity.

"Let me be the one to begin the identifying process," he amended. "My name is Vance Tregarvon, and I have the misfortune to be the present owner of the valueless piece of property known as the Ocoee Mine. You are more than welcome to make a rifle-range of my landscape any time you wish. I am quite certain it is the only useful purpose it has ever subserved."

The gentleman whose coat was either clerical or schoolmasterish, bowed gravely and took his turn, prefacing it with a question.

"Have you ever heard of Highmount College for Young Women, Mr. Tregarvon?"

Tregarvon, in deference to piquancies and slate-blue eyes and the like, was tempted to quibble and say that, of course, every one knew of Highmount College. But the heavenly eyes were holding him, and they promised intolerance of anything but the pellucid truth. So he shook his head regretfully.

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"Such is fame—the fame of an old, a great, and a noble institution of learning!" said the spectacled one, in mock deprecation. "With a foundation laid over half a century in the past, with the most healthful and charming location on the entire Cumberland Mountain for its site; with a corps of instructors second only to those of the richly endowed colleges of the North—correct me, Miss Richardia, if I am not quoting the prospectus accurately—with all these splendid advantages, and with a student body drawn from the oldest and most distinguished families of the South. . . . Mr. Tregarvon, can it be possible——"

"Spare me!" laughed the victim. "You must remember that I am only a poor, ignorant provincial from Philadelphia, less than a fortnight out of the shell."

"We are merely trying to impress you properly so that you will think twice before having us arrested for trespass and attempted assassination," broke in the laughing markswoman. "We may not look it, but we are a majority of the faculty of Highmount College for Young Women. Let me present you to Madame Fortier, Modern Languages; to Miss Longstreet, Art; to Miss Farron, Assistant Mathematics; and to Pro-

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fessor William Wilberforce Hartridge, M.A., Vanderbilt, Higher Mathematics and the Natural Sciences."

Tregarvon bowed in turn to the Gallic eyebrows, to the artist's smock, to the red tam-o'-shanter, and shook hands cordially with the M.A., Vanderbilt.

"This is fine, you know; it's like Robinson Crusoe's meeting with his rescuers," he asserted joyously. "This is my first real hearing of the English tongue since I began doing time down yonder in Coalville, with my old ruin of an office-building for a dungeon, and Mrs. Matt Tryon for my jail matron. Is it very far to Highmount College? And may I hope sometime to——"

The three younger women laughed at this, and Madame Fortier hastened to be hospitable.

"We shall be moz' charm', Monsieur Tregarvong. I will spik for President Caswell and hees good madame." But Tregarvon waited for Miss Richardia's confirmation, which was given unhesitatingly.

"Certainly, you must come, if you can spare the time," she affirmed. "We were speaking of you, and of the Ocoee prospects, at dinner the other evening, and Doctor Caswell was even then

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threatening to look you up. I think he said he had met your father in years gone by."

"I am sure that was exceedingly kind and hospitable—to think of taking the stranger up before he had made himself known," said Tregarvon, with the hearth-warmed exile's glow at his heart. They were moving over to the rifle-rest, and he had fallen a step or two behind with Miss Richardia. "You would have to be a castaway in a strange land yourself to know how good it feels to be counted in."

"I have been both—the castaway and the counted-in," she returned. "I was four years in Boston; two of them without knowing a single soul outside of a limited little Conservatory circle."

"Ah," he said, with the air of one who pats himself on the back for his own perspicacity. "You didn't introduce yourself a moment ago, as you may remember, but I was sure you were Music."

"Why were you?" she asked.

"Because you look it."

"Harmony or discord?" she queried, with the bright little laugh remindful of the bird songs.

"How can you ask! Celestial harmony—no less!" It was only a matter of a hundred yards,

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between the oak-tree target and the firing-stand, but they were getting on very well, indeed.

"Following that line of reasoning, you might say that Miss Longstreet looks picturesque, I suppose? And Miss Farron——"

"Miss Farron is far too charming to warrant any allusion to figures, mathematical or other," he retorted lightly.

"And how about Professor Billy?"

Tregarvon chuckled. "Is that what you call him? I'm glad I have a Christian name that can't very well be nicked entirely out of all resemblance to the original. Which reminds me: have I got to call you 'Miss Richardia'? It sounds awfully formal—don't you think?—in the mouth of a man who has been familiarly shot at by its possessor."

"You had better," she replied calmly. "I am 'Miss Dick' in the classrooms; but that is the student body's privilege. Other people have to earn it."

"Consider me an employee from this moment, if you please. I'm good at earning things."

"Have you earned the Ocoee property?" she asked, altogether, as it appeared, by way of making conversation.

"No; but my father did—very bitterly, as it

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turned out. May I ask what you know about the Ocoee?"

"Only what every one knows: that it brings sorrow and ruin to everybody who has anything to do with it."

They had reached the rifle-stand, and Hart-ridge was reloading the target-gun for Miss Far-ron. There was still a little isolation for Tregarvon and his companion, and the young man made the most of it.

"Your words imply a lot more than they say," he suggested. "I shall take an early opportunity to make my Highmount call, and when I do, perhaps you will tell me some of the things I need to know."

"Professor Hartridge or President Caswell can tell you better than I can," she demurred, as one dismissing an unpleasant subject. "I only know that the mine has always been a wretched failure; first a thing of broken promises, and afterward a cunningly devised pitfall for the unwary."

If Tregarvon had for his major weakness the love of women, he was not lacking such other qualities as may go with broad shoulders, good gray eyes set wide apart, a clean-cut face, and a resolute jaw. The squareness of the jaw was emphasized when he said: "This is the time when

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the Ocoee quits being a failure, Miss Richardia. It is up to me to make it a success, and I mean to do it."

It was at this conjuncture that Miss Farron, trying vainly to sight the rifle over the fallen-tree firing-stand, broke in upon the *tête-à-tête*.

"Dickie, dear, do come here and hold your hand over my left eye," she called plaintively. "It just persists in coming open to see what the other one is trying to do."

II

The Sow's Ear

THE rough-hewn world of mountain and valley had taken on a distinctly cheerful aspect for the young man from Philadelphia when, late in the afternoon, he reluctantly separated himself from the rifle-shooting party and turned his steps valleyward to keep an appointment made two days earlier with one Angus Duncan, an old Scotch mining expert, upon whom the great Southern title company, unlimited, had long since conferred the brevet of "captain."

Whatever the Tregarvon gray eyes and resolute jaw promised in the way of decisive action and stubborn determination, their possessor was never born to be a contented anchorite. Not even the matchless beauties of nature, arrayed in all the glories of a Tennessee mountain September, could atone for the solitude imposed by the dead-alive hamlet of Coalville, and the newly opened prospect of an occasional escape to the congenial social atmosphere of the mountain-top school was like the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land.

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Tregarvon was planning the first of these escapes, and forecasting the time which would be consumed in freighting his motor-car down from Philadelphia, when the forest path ended and let him out among the deserted slope-foot buildings and empty coke-ovens of the Ocoee. He glanced at his watch. The up train on the branch railroad was due; it had doubtless announced its approach by some distant crossing whistle, since the little squad of village idlers had left its cantonments under the porch of Tait's store to straggle across to the station platform.

Tregarvon remained on his own side of the railroad-tracks and waited. He knew that Captain Duncan's visit would be discussed in all its possible bearings in the idlers' caucus at Tait's, and he was willing to disappoint the country-store gossips when it came in his way.

There were but few passengers to get on or off at Coalville when the branch-line train rolled up to the platform, and Tregarvon had no difficulty in identifying his man; the stocky, ruddy-faced, shrewd-eyed mining engineer who had been named to him as the foremost coal expert in the Tennessee field. He cut Duncan out of the group of loungers at the instant of hand-shaking, and took him across to the dilapidated building which had

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once been the superintendent's office and the commissary of the Ocoee Company, seeking, and securing, as he imagined, ear-shot privacy for the business conference.

But privacy in a Southern country hamlet, where gossip is as the breath of life to the isolated few, is only to be bought with a price. From his post of observation in Tait's doorway, a lank, bristly-bearded man in grimy jeans that had once been butternut, marked the direction of the retreat across the railroad-tracks, made a dodging *détour* around the engine of the standing train, and was safely hidden behind a thick clump of althea bushes at the corner of the office-building when Tregarvon and the Scotchman came leisurely to sit on the door-stone.

"Ye're paying me for an expert opeenion, Mr. Tregarvon, and that's what I'm bound to gie ye," the engineer was saying. "I've known the Ocoee ever since the first pick was piked intil it, and ye'll be wasting your time and money if you try to develop it. That's what I told your father, and it's what I'm telling his son."

"Poor coal? Or not enough of it?" Tregarvon's manner was that of a man desirous of knowing the exact facts.

"Good coal—fine! It makes a coke that

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would run everything this side of Pocahontas, or maybe Connellsville, out o' the market. And there is enough of it if the two veins could be worked as one. But there's the bogie, Mr. Tregarvon; two well-defined veins, each a foot and a half thick, one above the other, and with six foot of solid rock between. If you had twenty such veins it wouldn't pay to work them in this part of the country."

"You mean that the digging out of the rock between the two coal seams would eat up all the profits?"

"Just that."

Tregarvon was pulling ineffectually at his short pipe. When he stooped to pluck a spear of grass for a stem-cleaner he said: "Wasn't it the notion of the earliest promoters that the two veins would merge into one, farther back in the mountain?"

The expert waved his hand toward the long and costly inclined tramway running straight up the steep slope of the mountain to the two black openings at the foot of the cliff-line.

"Ye'd think they believed in it—wouldn't ye now—to build that tramway on the strength of it? Two hunner' thousand and better they put in here, first and last; on the tramway and the

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coke-ovens, the miners' houses, and this fine office-building that's crum'ling down behind our backs! And with every practical coal man in the country telling them that such a thing as two veins—two separate veins, mind ye—coming into one was a geological impossibeelity. Parker—the man who set the trap and caught everybody—he knew, I'm thinking; but Judge Birrell and all the rest of 'em were crazy—fair crazy!"

"But is it a geological impossibility, Captain Duncan? That is one of the questions I got you up here to answer for me," Tregarvon put in.

The Scotch engineer was too cautious to be definitely oracular.

"It's never been h'ard of yet," he replied shrewdly, "and there's a many to tell ye that the day o' merricles is past. But that isn't all, Mr. Tregarvon. Besides being a sow's ear that ye canna hope to make into a silk purse, the Ocoee has another handicap. If ye had your coal in profitable shape and quantity, ye'd never be allowed to mine and coke and market it; never in this world."

"Who would stop me?"

"The C. C. & I. Company, which is another name in this part o' the world for Consolidated Coal—the trust. The combine owns all the pro-

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ducing mines hereabouts; they've got one in full blast at Whitlow, five miles above this. If you should develop into anything worth while, it would be another case of the lion and the lamb lying down in peace together—with the Ocoee lamb inside of the trust lion. They couldn't afford to lat ye operate. Your coke, for as much of it as ye could make, would drive theirs out o' the market."

"Well?" said the Philadelphian.

"They'd buy ye, if they could haggle ye down to sell at a bargain; and, failing in that, they'd break ye. I'm not questioning your resources, ye unnerstand; that part of it was none of my business after I'd had your check for my fee safely in my pocket," he threw in cannily. "But tell me, now: if ye had your four or five or even six foot of coal, are ye big enough in the way o' backing and capital to fight Consolidated Coal wi' any hope of coming out alive?"

"That is as it may be," said Tregarvon, wishing neither to deny nor to affirm publicly. Then he asked casually if the engineer could give chapter and page proving the Cumberland Coal and Iron Company's policy of extermination.

"Can I no?" said the Scotchman, with a snap of the shrewd eyes. "I can show ye wrecked

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mines by the handfu' in a day's ride up and down this same Wehatchee Valley we're sitting in. 'Tis the power o' money, Mr. Tregarvon. When ye get between the jaws o' that crusher, ye're like this"—picking up a bit of friable sandstone and crumbling it in his palm.

The younger man smoked on thoughtfully for a time. Then he said: "Two of the points upon which I wished to have your opinion have been covered pretty conclusively, it would seem. But there is a third. What about this trouble with the McNabbs over the land title?"

The Scotchman waved the third point away as if it had been a buzzing fly.

"The McNabbs are just a whiskey-making lot of poor bodies living back in the Pocket beyond Highmount. An unscrupulous lawyer-scamp got hold of them when the second Ocoee Company was fair rolling in money, and showed them how they could trump up a claim to a wedge-like slip o' land on the top o' the mountain which, if the claim could be made good, would cut off the mine a hundred feet or so back from the cliff. There was neither sense nor justice in it, and the courts said so. Ye'll be having no trouble wi' the McNabbs, unless one o' them might be taking a pop at ye wi' his squirrel-gun some fine day."

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Tregarvon smiled, recalling his sensations while Miss Richardia's bullets were snipping bark souvenirs from his sheltering oak.

"One wouldn't be scared out by a little thing like that," he remarked half humorously. Then he asked, quite abruptly, another question—the chief question for an answer to which he had paid the expert's fee.

"I have been told, Captain Duncan, that you have made an analysis of the Ocoee coals. Also, I have been given to understand that no two veins in these Tennessee coal-measures have exactly the same characteristics; that the quality of the coal varies with its distance from the original surface, though the depth difference between any two deposits may be very slight. If you didn't know of the existence of the six-foot layer of stone lying between my two coal seams, would you, or would you not, say that they were one and the same?"

Duncan took time to consider before answering the crucial question.

"I see what ye're driving at, now," he said at length. "Ye've paid me for a true answer, Mr. Tregarvon, and much as I'll hate to see your father's son banging his head against a stone wall, I'll give it ye. I've made half a dozen analyses:

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so far as they prove anything, the coal in the two seams is the same."

"Thank you," returned Tregarvon, drawing a free breath as if a burden had been lifted from his shoulders by the answer. And then, as a quavering whistle blast announced the approach of the down freight train on the branch: "There is your return train, Captain Duncan. If I had any hospitality to offer you, you shouldn't go back to Hesterville to-night. As it is, I know you'll be glad you don't have to stop over in Coalville. Even the name is a misnomer, it would seem."

The grizzled Scotchman had discharged his duty and earned his fee. But the cravings of a purely Caledonian curiosity were still unsatisfied.

"And what'll ye be doing, think ye, Mr. Tregarvon?" he asked inquisitively.

Tregarvon's answer was pointedly and purposefully indifferent. "Oh, I don't know definitely yet. I may take a notion to butt my head against the stone wall, and I may not. If I should, you'll doubtless hear of it. Good-by; it was mighty good of you to take the trouble to come and talk with me when you might have put me off with a letter."

Though the leave-taking at the door of the

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office-building was a fact accomplished, Tregarvon prolonged it a little by walking across to the station with Duncan. Thereby he missed a possible chance of seeing the retreat of the man who had been crouching behind the althea bushes, the dodging run, first to the shelter of the row of coke-ovens, and later to the lower fringe of the Mount Pisgah forest, darkening now in the early valley twilight.

Late that night, in his room in the cobwebbed and dismantled office-building, Tregarvon wrote two letters. The first was to a certain golden youth in New York, a young man rejoicing in the ancient and honorable name of Poitiers Carfax, and whose father had left him more money than he knew what to do with. Upon Carfax Tregarvon leaned as upon a brother, having shared rooms with the golden one in the university at a period in which the Tregarvon family check could also have been drawn for seven figures.

"You are always howling and taking on about living the simple life," was the opening phrase in the letter to Carfax. "I wish you could be with me to-night and have a taste of what it really is—ten thousand miles from the Great White Way or a decent beefsteak. I'd describe it for you if

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this were anything but a begging letter—which it isn't.

"First, I wish you'd send your machinist over to Philadelphia and have him ship my car to me here. Tell him to put in extras of everything, from spark-plugs to tires, just the same as if he were sending it to a man in Darkest Africa.

"Next (and this is of more importance to me, and perhaps less to you), I am going into a scheme here which promises to leave me stony broke before I shall have pulled half-way through the experimental stage, and will possibly bankrupt even the Carfax strong box when it fairly gets its second wind. I may have to sell you some stock, later on, and to that end I'll be glad if you'll keep in touch—so that you may be 'touched'—or at least keep yourself within reach of a wire.

"This is all I'm going to write, for the time being, except to say that I've thought of you about five times a minute during the past week, and have tried to picture you in Coalville, hesitating between suicide and a lingering death from disgust. Come down and try it. I'll go bail it will give you an entirely new set of sensations. What do you say?"

The second letter was to Miss Elizabeth Wardwell, and it was a masterpiece in its way—the

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way of a man who writes as he would talk, and who talks when he would much better hold his tongue.

"The adventures began to-day," so ran the words of un wisdom. "While I was clambering around on the mountain above the Ocoee opening, *zip!* came a bullet—yes, an indubitable leaden bullet fired from a gun—near enough to make me dodge. What will you think of me when I write it down in muddy black ink on white paper that I hid behind a tree! I did, you know, and immediately had plenty of reasons for being thankful that the tree was big enough to cover me, and thick enough through to stop a rifle-bullet.

"For fifteen minutes, or such a matter—though it seemed a moderately long lifetime—my assassin kept busy with the sharpshooting, and I could feel myself growing smaller with every fresh spat of a bullet into my tree. What did I think? I thought of you, my dear Elizabeth, and wondered if you'd keep your promise to marry me in accordance with the terms of Uncle Byrd's will if I should be obliged to kill a man. Would you?

"When it was all over, my assassins—it turned out that there was a bunch of them—proved to be a party of school-teachers from Highmount

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College shooting at a mark, which the same—though I hadn't seen it, and didn't remotely suspect its existence—was affixed to the farther side of my tree. There were five people in the party; three attractive young women, a French lady of uncertain age, and a middle-aged professor in spectacles doing escort duty. Of course, there were explanations and apologies all around: I had slipped out, cocked revolver in hand, with a sort of 'Now I'll get you!' expression on my face, I suppose.

"They were all very kind to me, especially the young woman who had been doing the actual shooting. I wish you could hear her laugh. It is the sweetest thing in Tennessee. She has the soft Southern voice, and a face that can be perfectly wooden one minute and a whole insurrectionary passion-stirring volume in the next. No, Miss Wardwell, I didn't make love to her. How could I, with all the others standing about and looking on and listening in?

"I'm to make myself free of the college, they say, and perhaps I shall—later on. Please don't lift those matchless eyebrows of yours and ask if I'm not going to wait at least until I have met these people properly. If you could see my present surroundings, and realize for one little

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instant what an elemental ruffian these same surroundings are likely to make of me, you'd urge me to go.

"Please write often. You can't imagine how I hang upon the arrival of your letters—how much they mean to me."

III

The Golden Youth

IT was on the day following Captain Angus Duncan's visit that the hamlet of Coalville, nestling at the foot of Mount Pisgah, took a fresh start as an industrial centre. Word went out from Tait's store, which served as a general intelligence exchange for the country roundabout, that Tregarvon wanted laborers and would pay good wages.

The men came; some from the half-tilled valley farms, a few from the C. C. & I. mines farther up the railroad, and two or three mountaineers. Two of the mountain dwellers, long-haired, unshaven backwoodsmen, gave their names as Morgan and Sill, suppressing, for some reason best known to themselves, their surname of McNabb. Also there came the lean, bristly-bearded man who had squatted behind the althea bushes at the corner of the office-building during Tregarvon's talk with Captain Duncan; James Sawyer, by name. Tregarvon knew nothing of this man's antecedents; of the forehistory of any of them,

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for that matter. What he demanded was work, and he went about securing it in the best of all possible ways: by stripping off his coat and acting as his own foreman.

In strenuous toilings fled the first two weeks, during which period the old machinery was overhauled, the tramway up the mountain repaired and put in running order, and the *débris* of disuse cleared away. For the aggressive campaign a deep-well drilling plant was secured in Chattanooga, and upon its arrival all things were made ready for transporting it to the top of the plateau mountain.

Tregarvon's plan, which he thought was original with him, was to go back on the level mountain top with his test-drill, and to sink a series of holes down to the coal-measures. If the first test should show the two veins still separated by the stubborn ledge of intervening rock, he would move the machinery farther back and try again—and yet again, if need be; though of all this he said no more to his workmen than was necessary to enable them to help intelligently.

At the beginning of the second week the drilling machinery was hauled up the mountain, and two days later, Uncle William, a solemn-faced old negro with a narrow fringe of white wool ringing

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his otherwise perfectly bald head, made his appearance at Coalville.

He was waiting for Tregarvon on the Thursday morning when the Philadelphian turned out to go up the mountain with his working gang; waiting to doff his battered hat and scrape his foot, and to announce in honeyed tones that he had come "ter tek cha'ge of de young marsteh."

Quite naturally, Tregarvon thought there must be some mistake, and said so; but the old man persisted with the velvety sort of pertinacity which refuses to be denied, vaunting himself as a body-servant of "the quality," and acquiring, or seeming to acquire, a curious hardness of hearing. when Tregarvon questioned him as to where he had come from and who had sent him.

"Yas, suh—yas, suh; cayn't hear ve'y good on dat side o' my haid—no, suh. But I'se suttin sho' gwine tek mighty good keer o' you-all; I is dat, marsteh."

"But a body-servant is the last thing on earth that I am needing here, uncle!" protested Tregarvon, firing his final shot of objection. "If I could find a good cook now, that would be more to the point."

"Dat's it—dat's it, suh. You-all jes' go 'long up de mounting and boss dem po' white trash,

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and lef' ol' Unc' Wilyum ter fix up dat cook-house. He gwine show you what quality cookin' is; yas, suh; he will dat!"

Tregarvon left the old man bowing and scraping and backing away to take possession of the deserted office-building and its detached cook-shanty; and when he came back to the valley in the evening he gasped to remember how near he had come to incurring the penalty imposed upon those who refuse to entertain angels in disguise.

The old office-building was swept and garnished, above and below. Out of the lumber-room in the basement Uncle William had rescued a dining-table, chairs, napery of a sort, and dishes; and in the rear room, which had once been the office of the Ocoee superintendent, a supper was spread, hot, smoking, and appetizing enough to tempt a sick man. Even the napkins, improvised for the moment out of pieces of a flour-sack washed to snowy whiteness, were not lacking; and when the master would sit down, Uncle William was behind him to whisk the chair away and to replace it, with all the deftness of a trained butler.

Tregarvon ate and drank in grateful and heartfelt silence down to the black coffee, which was served, for the want of the proper crockery, in an

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egg-cup, with a small fruit dish for a saucer. Then he made the amende honorable.

"I don't know who you are, or where you came from, Uncle William, but I owe you an apology, none the less," he said. "Consider that I belong to you for as long as you care to keep me—at your own price."

"Yas, suh; dat's it—dat's jes' de way de quality talk to ol' Unc' Wilyum, eve'y time—*hyuh! hyuh!* 'Long erbout an hour o' sun, white woman comed ercross f'om dat white-niggah cabin turrer side de big road, and she say: 'I gwine fix up Mistoo Tregarbin's suppeh.' I say, 'Mistoo Tregarbin 'sents his compliments an' say t'ank you kin'ly, but he done got he own body-sarvant!' Yas, suh; dat's what I done tol' *huh.*"

Tregarvon's eyes twinkled.

"You'll be getting yourself disliked, Uncle William, if you put on your quality manners with Mrs. Tryon and her kind. They tell me that this county was Republican during the war." Then he added: "Are you ready to tell me now who sent you here?"

The old man was clearing the supper-table, and he seemed to have entirely misunderstood the query.

"Dat ol' cook-house? Yas, suh; it sholy did

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try me for to git dat ol' chimley ter mek de fiah bu'n for de supper-fixin's. Ter-morrer I gwine chink him up some; yas, suh, I sholy is."

After Uncle William's mysterious advent the work on the mountain progressed the more rapidly by precisely the difference between a well-fed leader and an ill-fed. Tregarvon and his pick-up crew wrought manfully, and on the eighteenth day—the day of fresh surprises—the drilling machinery had been safely transported to the plateau, had been set up, and was ready to be started on the test upon which the Tregarvon hopes were building airy structures of future affluence.

At quitting-time on this eighteenth day of preparatory toil Tregarvon came down in a tram-car with his men and, after the dispersal at the mountain foot, stood for a moment on the office-building porch to let the quiet grandeur of the perfect autumn evening soak in and wash the work-weariness out of his jaded brain and muscles.

The sun had gone behind the mountain for all the lower reaches of the valley, but its level rays were still pouring in a flood of yellow light across the flat-topped promontory crowned by the buildings of Highmount College. Pisgah, densely forested on slope and summit, loomed vast as the

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early shadows rose like silently drawn curtains to soften its rugged detail, and on the sky-line Tregarvon's gaze sought and found the derrick skeleton of his drilling plant struck out in rigid lines of black against the hazy blue. Just above him the tramway cut its steeply ascending gash through the forest of the slope, and in his mind's eye he could see the cars descending, each with its load of the reopened mine's largesse, to be dumped upon the receiving-platform beside the row of coke-ovens.

From the outlined derrick to the sun-illuminated college buildings was an airy leap of a mile or more. Tregarvon had not as yet used his invitation, though the French teacher's giving of it had been promptly confirmed by a cordial note from the president's wife. The social hunger rose strong in the expatriated townlander as he let his eyes make the leap from the industries, typified by the derrick skeleton, to the possible relaxations harboring on Highmount. He meant to go; he promised himself afresh that he would go, the moment his motor-car should arrive and be put into commission to make the five-mile climb up the mountain pike from Coalville something less than an added weariness after a hard day's work.

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He was still looking longingly up to the sun-shot heights and wondering why he had heard nothing from Poitiers Carfax, when a sound, breeze-blown up the valley, made him start and listen. When he heard it again it was nearer; the unmistakable roar of an automobile's engines with the muffler cut out. To confirm the witness of the ear, a big yellow car presently topped the rise in the valley road below the village and came bounding over the roughnesses of the country wagon track toward the railroad crossing.

Tregarvon immediately recognized his own car and the cacophonous thunderings of it; but it was only a guess that the slender young man in dust-coat and goggles behind the steering-wheel was Carfax; that the square-shouldered fellow in a leather jacket and closely fitting cap beside him was the machinist; and that the liveried person sitting bolt upright with folded arms in the exact centre of the tonneau seat was Merkley, Carfax's imported valet.

Tregarvon gasped, and his hands went up in the gesture of a man vainly striving to avert a crash of worlds. "Great Heavens!" he ejaculated. And at that moment Jefferson Walters, acting chairman of the convention of idlers in session under the awning of Tait's store porch, made

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himself an imaginary errand to Tryon's, across from and a little beyond the Ocoee office-building, timing his saunter to bring him upon the scene as an interested onlooker when the yellow car rolled up to Tregarvon's door.

"Hit do beat the Dutch—what-all gits up in the big woods when you ain't totin' a gun," he remarked to the executive session when he returned to the other side of the railroad. "Young feller with the eye-glasses—he must be powerful nigh blind to have to wear sech big ones—he pulls up the team with a jerk at a han'le, and says: 'Hello, Vance! Here we are; the dog and the tail, and the tail wagging the dog.' And Tregarvon, he jest shets his fists tight and says, sort o' hoarse-like, 'My Lord, Putters'—'r some sech name as that—'did you tool that car all the way down here from Philadelphia?' 'Sure, I did,' says Goggles; and all the while that there circus ringmaster was a-settin' up like he'd growed with a hick'ry saplin' down his back, lookin' straight out ahead of him as if he didn't know that anything was happenin', 'r was ever goin' to happen."

"President o' the new Ocoee Comp'ny, d' ye reckon?" queried one of the listeners.

"President o' nothin'! I'm comin' to him, right now. 'And you brought Merkley?' says

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Tregarvon, speakin' right low and soft, and chokin' some more. 'Naturally,' says Goggles, as cool as a cucumber, and then he climbs out and goes in with our man, with the ringmaster feller *totin' the carpet-bags!*"

"I know," chirruped the oldest man in the circle, a wizened veteran of the Mexican War. "I seed 'em in the army; the West Pointer gin'rals had 'em—called 'em val-lays."

"I wonder what-all our young feller over yander'll turn up next?" mused Jabez Layne, bringing his huge jack-knife to bear upon a pocket-worn nugget of plug tobacco.

"He'll turn up a heap o' trouble ef he don't quit hirin' them McNabbs," volunteered one of the valley men who had hitherto been speechless. "He's got two of 'em in his gang now—Morgan an' Sill; an' ef they don't git him afore he gits the coal——"

"Why, then, the C. C. & I. 'll git him about five minutes afte'wards," laughed Walters, breaking in to complete the sentence in his own way.

Thus ran the leisurely comment in the gray of the evening, working its way from man to man among the loungers on Tait's porch. But in the dilapidated office-building across the railroad-tracks there was consternation.

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"Why, Poictiers, old man, you can't endure it for twenty-four hours!" Tregarvon was protesting anxiously. "Look at this place—a dusty, cobwebby ruin that a self-respecting tramp wouldn't lodge in! Heavens, man! couldn't you see a joke when it was written out plain with a pen and ink? I would have as soon invited Elizabeth—meaning it!"

Carfax had slipped out of his dust-coat and goggles, the valet assisting, and stood revealed as a handsome young fellow, a shade too well-groomed, perhaps, but with smiling good-nature atoning for the Carfax millions in every line of his beardless and almost effeminate face.

"Now that is what I call downright inhospitable," he laughed, with the faintest suspicion of a lisp on the sibilants, "after you had written me to come. Your letter is out in the go-cart, if Merkley didn't forget to put it in my letter-case. Also, after I've driven that unspeakable car of yours over a thousand miles of the worst roads the rain ever rained on——"

"Oh, good Lord, Poictiers—you're welcome; as welcome as the sunshine! Don't rub it into me that way. But the place; the—the——"

Carfax's smile was cherubic; or rather it would have been if the womanish lines of his face had not made it seraphic.

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"No apologies, you inexpressible old coal-digger. I knew you were only joking when you asked me—or rather dared me—to come down. But the notion seized me, and here I am. Here, likewise, is Rucker, the machinist, who will happily shift for himself; and what is more serious, perhaps, here also is Merkley. In all human probability I shall bleat like a sheep at the corn-pones and the hardtack, and all that; but Merkley was once in the service of the Duke of Marlford, and his agonies——"

Tregarvon laughed, and the stresses came off.

"Luckily, I have acquired Uncle William, or, perhaps I should say, he has acquired me, since I wrote you, and you won't starve, whatever happens to Merkley. Find your way up-stairs and take possession, while I tell the old uncle what he is up against in the way of supper-getting. You'll find a bath, with ice-cold mountain spring water—my one luxury—at the end of the upper corridor."

Considering his resources, which were few and strictly limited, Uncle William shed a lustre all his own upon the dinner for two, which was served in the makeshift dining-room as soon as Carfax came down.

"I'm sure you needn't find fault with your table," was the guest's comment, when the snowy biscuits and the egg-bread, the fried chicken and

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the riced potatoes had passed in review. "I only wish I could induce an Uncle William to adopt me."

Thus the master; but the London-bred man was not faring so well. It was Uncle William's effort to orient the valet—an effort vocalizing itself through the screened windows of Tregarvon's dining-room—that reopened the question of the practicabilities.

"Is you-all dat gemman's white niggah?" was the blunt demand, made when Merkley, dinner-inclined, ventured into the sacred precincts of Uncle William's detached cook-house.

"H-I am Mr. Carfax's man, and h-I'll trouble you to serve my dinner," was the lofty reply, returned in Merkley's best tone of aloofness.

"I's askin' ef you is dat gemman's white niggah!"—scornfully. "Ef you is, you jes' sots youse'f down on dat door-step an' waits, same as any turrer niggah. When de quality folks gets t'rough, an' *I* gets t'rough, den you kin have what's lef'."

Carfax waved a shapely hand toward the open window.

"The irrepressible conflict has begun," he remarked. "What do you do in such cases in—er—Coalville?"

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"We go down on our knees, metaphorically speaking, and plead with an outraged and righteously indignant Uncle William," Tregarvon laughed; and when the old negro made his next appearance in the dining-room, the Philadelphian did it so skilfully that Merkley was provided for at a side table in the hall; not of grace, as certain mumblings from the cook-house proved, but because the master desired it.

"That settles our status," said Carfax, with the cherubic smile, "at least down to Rucker, the mechanician. I wonder what has become of him?"

"If he is the same mechanical barbarian you had last year, he'll not go hungry," Tregarvon ventured; and then, with the assurance of a tried friend: "Whatever possessed you to come down here *en suite*, Poictiers? Did I give you the impression that the Ocoee headquarters was a summer-resort hotel?"

Carfax laughed joyously. "You certainly did not. But I was tired of Lenox, and it was too early for the shooting. Moreover, you said you wanted your car, and the fit took me to drive it. That accounts for Rucker; and I suppose I account for poor Merkley. He is due to have the time of his gay young life—don't you think?"

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with Uncle William and the elemental environment? But tell me more about your affair. What have you been letting yourself in for, down here in the Southern backwoods?"

Uncle William had removed the cloth, and had put a tobacco-jar and two pipes on the table.

"It is the best we can do, even for you," said Tregarvon, indicating the tobacco aftermath apologetically. "Nobody has ever seen a bottle of wine in Coalville, and the whiskey of the country isn't fit to drink." Then he plunged abruptly into the story of the Ocoee, so far as he knew it, giving the last-resort reasons why he was trying to make a family windbreak of it, and Carfax heard him through patiently.

"Then it sums itself up about like this: You haven't anything at present, and if you succeed in getting anything, the other fellows will nab it," he said, when Tregarvon had finished. "Is that about the size of it?"

"You have surrounded it completely. Only I am eliminating the 'if.' I mean to get something, and I don't mean to let the other fellows get away with it."

"Any move made yet?" queried Carfax, between delicate little puffs at the pipe of hospitality.

"Not visibly. The trust people will scarcely

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move in the matter until after I have proved my first proposition, which is that the two veins of coal become one farther back in the mountain. But the McNabbs may not wait that long."

"Who are the McNabbs?"

Tregarvon explained again, at some length, not omitting mention of a mysterious leaf fire which had threatened to destroy a tramway trestle, and other small accidents which had somewhat impeded the work of the past fortnight, and which were blankly unaccountable save upon a theory of somebody's malice.

"Why don't you buy 'em off?" said Carfax casually. Money was his cure-all for most human ills.

"For one reason, they haven't given me a chance. For another, I don't propose to be held up and robbed. They haven't any title to the land; they have never had a shadow of a title." Then he broke off suddenly, glanced at his watch, and changed the subject. "How much too tired are you to take a five-mile spin with me up the mountain in the car, Poictiers?" he asked.

Carfax's eyebrows went up in mild surprise. Nevertheless, he said: "Call it a go—if you can find Rucker."

"Never mind Rucker; I'll drive you myself,"

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said Tregarvon, and a few minutes later the big car, with its dazzling head-lamps picking out the way, was storming up the steep grades of the Pisgah pike to Highmount.

IV

In Which Carfax Enlists

ON the broad veranda of the administration building at Highmount, which looked down sidewise upon the twinkling light or two of Coalville and faced on even terms an opposing shoulder of the mountain where the newly erected drill derrick stood, Carfax was holding Miss Farron and four privileged members of the senior class at bay, while Tregarvon contentedly monopolized Miss Richardia Birrell.

The two thus comfortably isolated had quickly exhausted the commonplaces. Tregarvon was made to know thus early that one of Miss Richardia's charms was her ability to plunge at once into the heart of things; and the talk had turned upon Carfax, distance and the hubbub of the others sanctioning personalities.

"Oh, you don't know him yet," Tregarvon protested, in refutation of a remark of Miss Birrell's based upon Carfax's apparent satisfaction with his present besetment. "He is anything but a butterfly, in the meaning you imply; and I say

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this in spite of his pretty face and airy gabble, and the lisp and his bad habit of slipping instinctively, as you might say, into the easiest chair in sight. I've summered him and wintered him, and I know."

"I like loyalty," said Miss Richardia, with the air of one to whom abstractions are as daily bread. "Are you going to winter him in Coalville?"

"No such good luck as that for me, I'm afraid. After the shooting begins, I don't imagine he has a week untaken. You may not believe it, but Poitiers is in demand—where he is known and appreciated."

"I am sure we shall appreciate him," was the half-mocking rejoinder. "Young men who come to Highmount driving their own tonneau cars are not so plentiful."

Tregarvon's laugh was not more than decently boastful.

"This particular tonneau car happens to be mine," he explained. "Besides, Carfax might discount your praise. His latest purchase is an imported Dumont-Sillery, I believe. It probably cost three times as much as mine; and on the other side of the water, at that."

"How easily and familiarly you talk of im-

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ported luxuries and 'the other side'," she commented, still in the mocking vein. And then, with an exactly proportioned touch of wistfulness: "I wish I might have a glimpse into your world; the world you have turned your back upon—temporarily."

Tregarvon slid into this little pitfall without realizing that it had been digged especially for him, thus proving that social hunger may be as blind as any of the other appetites. So far from suspecting pitfalls, he was thinking that there were many less enjoyable diversions than sitting in a moderately secluded corner of a dimly lighted veranda in the company of a young woman who was kind enough to evince an interest in a chance visitor's proper sphere.

"It is not such a very high-planed world, the one I've left behind, Miss Richardia; not nearly as human as this of Coalville and Mount Pisgah," he returned. "I believe I have seen more real human nature in the past three weeks than I had ever seen before."

"You mean that the other world is artificial?"

"It is; without intending to be, especially. We are not elemental any more; not even in our passions. We do things in a certain well-defined way because that is the way other people

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do them. We are afraid, or at least disinclined, to strike out on new lines."

"You have struck out on a new line, haven't you?" she asked.

"I have been pushed out, in this Ocoee matter. There is enough of the elemental surviving in me to make me break with traditions and become a hustler when it is a question of bread and meat for my mother and sister. But apart from that, I suppose I am quite as hidebound as other men of my world."

"And Mr. Carfax?" she queried. "Is he a slave to conventions, too?"

"Poictiers is a law unto himself in a good many ways; but on the whole, he's tarred with the same stick. You will remark his regalia: I couldn't have pulled him up here to-night with a three-inch hawser if he hadn't happened to have evening clothes in his kit. And he has brought his man; a typical Cockney valet, knee-smalls, Oxford ties, and all."

Miss Richardia's quiet laugh fitted the incongruity. But when she spoke again it was of the business affair.

"You are at work on the Ocoee?" she inquired.

"Yes, indeed! I am going to make a spoon

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or spoil a perfectly good horn. You must all come over and see my test-drilling outfit when we get it going."

"Is it your machine that we can see over beyond the glen? I wonder if you could make me understand what you are going to do?" she said, with interest real or so skilfully feigned that Tregarvon could not distinguish the difference.

He expressed himself as being very willing to try; did try at some considerable length. And Miss Birrell, notwithstanding an air of abstraction that seemed to come and go, appeared to grasp the mechanical details.

"You have no doubt that you will succeed? It will be fine to prove to everybody that all that was needed was for some one to come from the other world—your world—to show them how to do it."

Tregarvon winced, seeing now the pitfall into which he had suffered himself to be led.

"Is that the impression I've been giving you?" he asked. "Do I advertise myself as such a blooming bounder as that would signify?"

"Forgive me," she said, with a little laugh which might have meant anything from veiled ridicule to a keen appreciation of a palpable hit.

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"I suspect it is the way of your world to be austere sufficient unto itself. You may contradict me if I am wrong."

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed generously. "You are as much of my world as I am."

"Oh, no!" she objected: "we are only poor outlanders. I was called that once, in Boston; not spitefully, of course, but rather as an excuse for my shortcomings, I fancy."

"Whoever said it was a snob," he exploded. "Boston is horribly provincial, at times, you know."

"And Philadelphia never is?"

"I shouldn't dare to make the claim too broad. But I am sure we recognize the fact that there is an America west of the Alleghanies—and south of Mason and Dixon's line."

"That is charitable, at least," she conceded. "Still, you think it is left for you to demonstrate success where others have failed—in the Ocoee undertaking."

"I hadn't thought of it in that way," he answered, with due modesty. "Indeed, I know little or nothing about the early history of the mine. My father became interested in it some years before he died, and I think he always regarded it as a dead loss. But he bought the

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stock, or rather, I should say, had it forced upon him, when it was pretty cheap, and——”

“Yes,” she interrupted, a little forbiddingly, he thought; and then she began to speak of other things as if groping for a more congenial common ground. It was found when Tregarvon confessed to an amiable weakness for good music.

“I’ll play for you if you wish,” she said almost abruptly; and it was an hour later when Carfax entered the music-room to break the spell which Miss Richardia had woven about her single listener.

“You must do this again, but not too often,” was Tregarvon’s half-jesting warning to his entertainer at the moment of leave-taking; a moment snatched while Carfax was giving the privileged seniors a spin around the campus drive in the yellow car.

“Why not often?—or as often as you care to come?” the musician asked indifferently.

“Because I am much too impressionable. You could very easily make me forget some things that it is up to me to remember.”

“For example?” she prompted.

“It’s a long story, and Poitiers won’t give me time to tell it now. But some other evening, if I may come?”

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"Why shouldn't you come when you feel like it? I hope you won't go away underestimating your welcome—you and Mr. Carfax. You owe it to us to come frequently, so that the novelty will wear off—for the student body. I'll venture to assert that Miss Longstreet has been having the time of her life keeping order in the dormitories this evening. Good night; and give my love to Uncle William."

"To Uncle William? Then you know him?"

She laughed and showed him that Carfax was waiting for him. "Uncle William will know who sent the message if you say 'Miss Dick'," she explained; and he was obliged to accept this as an answer to his eager question.

The road down the mountain was a speeding track only in spots, and between stretches the big car crept at a snail's pace on the brakes, and so permitted conversation.

Carfax began it in genial raillery, congratulating Tregarvon upon the accessibility of Highmount and the very evident heartiness of his welcome.

"You can't desiccate entirely down here, Vance, with such a well-spring of youth and beauty as that within shouting distance," he remarked.

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But Tregarvon was thinking pointedly of Miss Richardia when he rejoined: "She is a puzzle to me, Poitiers; nothing less."

"The charming music teacher, you mean? Peaches-and-cream, I'd call her, if she'd let me."

"You're blind; blind as a mole!" retorted Tregarvon. "Why, man! she is anything but that—or those."

"Doubtless," Carfax laughed. "They are all 'anything but that' when you get down under the pose. But 'peaches-and-cream' is Miss Birrell's pose, just the same; not the conventional kind they serve you at the Waldorf or Ritz-Carlton, of course, but the sort you get when the cream comes thick and rich from your own dairy, and the peaches are picked, sun-warm, in your own orchard. You may tell her that, if you like, and palm it off as original with you. Strikes me it's rather neat."

"Oh, you go hang!" said Tregarvon. "I don't have to work in your compliments, second-hand. I can turn 'em myself, at a pinch."

At this point a half-mile of good road beckoned for speed, and the talk was interrupted. When it was resumed at the next curving hazard in the pike, Carfax had somewhat to say about the Ocoee.

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"What do you know about the ancient history of your mine, Vance?" he asked, when the topic was fairly launched.

"Nothing much, in detail. Why?"

"I was asking for information. President Caswell was speaking of it while you were in the music-room with Miss Birrell. He came out and sat with us for half an hour or so. There is a mystery of some sort connected with the Ocoee."

"Sure!" said Tregarvon. "The mystery is six feet thick, and it consists of a layer of good solid sandstone. I'm about to penetrate it with a test-drill."

"No; I didn't mean that," Carfax objected. "It is another kind of mystery. I'll tell you what Doctor Caswell said, and you may draw your own conclusions. We had been talking about superstitions and their hold upon humanity. I was scoffing, as usual, but the president seemed inclined to a belief that Providence or fate, or whatever you wish to call it, does interfere sometimes; and that these interferences form a basis for some of the convictions we call superstitions."

"All of which would seem to be a good many miles from a pair of coal seams made profitless by a stone 'horse' between them," suggested Tregarvon mildly.

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"I'm coming to that; the distance isn't so great as it may seem. The doctor rode his notion as if it were a hobby. He spoke of the well-grounded belief in the saying that 'murder will out,' and insisted that the facts proved the truth of this saying; facts which were often mysterious. Then he referred to that other pet notion of the bulk of mankind: that misfortune pursues the possessor of ill-gotten gains. To my astonishment, he pointed to your Ocoee property as an example."

"The dickens he did!" exclaimed Tregarvon, with interest suddenly awakened. "How did he make the Ocoee fit in?"

"That is the peculiar part of it. When I betrayed my complete ignorance of matters Ocoeean by beginning to ask questions, he shut up like a clam. All I could get out of him was an assertion that misfortunes had accompanied every succeeding attempt to open the mine, and that they would doubtless continue to follow until justice was done."

"But justice to whom?" queried Tregarvon. "You didn't let it rest at that, I hope."

"I tried not to, but he gave me a dignified cold shoulder and referred me to you; said you doubtless knew all the circumstances, and would,

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he hoped, take proper steps toward removing the curse."

The descent of Pisgah was accomplished, and Tregarvon steered the yellow car into an empty warehouse which was to be its garage.

Later, when he was showing his guest to the sleeping-room made ready for him by Uncle William, he said: "I don't wish to pull you into this thing with me blindfolded, Poictiers. If there is a skeleton in the Ocoee closet, I'll have it out and give it decent Christian burial before I ask you to back me."

But at this, Carfax appeared at his multi-millionaire best.

"You'll do nothing of the sort, old man. You will find me some old clothes to-morrow morning and we'll go up and set your test-drill at work. Further along, when more money is needed, I'll go somewhere to a bank and turn the fortunate spigot. We've got to make a go of your mine now, if only to show Doctor Caswell that the superstitions can't prove up on this particular homestead."

V

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CARFAX'S promise to stay and see the Ocoee experiment fairly on its feet was made in good faith, as the idlers at Tait's store, and more than these, a London-bred and disconsolate Merkley, were shortly given to understand. Moreover, the golden youth's threat of wearing old clothes and dipping into the crude mechanical processes of the experiment was also carried out; which not only deepened Merkley's conviction that he had attached himself to a mild-mannered lunatic of a peculiarly American type, but left him without an occupation—a mere fragment of urban flotsam eddying in the backlash of a rude current of bucolic unfamiliarity.

Unlike Rucker, the mechanician, who promptly donned overalls and jumper, pulled his tight-fitting burglar's cap down to his ears, and put himself at the head of Tregarvon's drilling squad on the mountain top, Merkley took to drink and the company of the loungers on Tait's porch.

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Here he became (though unhappily without knowing it) a target for the shrewd wit of the idlers, and, what he was even further from suspecting, the gossip circle's chief source of information touching the daily progress of the latest attempt to make a silk purse out of the Ocoee sow's ear.

At first there was little for Merkley to tell, and the army of leisure, smoking its corn-cob pipes and whittling the corners of the packing-boxes on Tait's porch, looked on and amused itself by slyly baiting the disconsolate Londoner.

Day by day, Tregarvon, Carfax, and the promoted chauffeur turned out early in the morning, took their places with the native laborers in the tram-car, and were lifted to the scene of their labors on high Pisgah. At sunset they came down, ate much, smoked a little, talked less, and, save for an occasional evening when Tregarvon and his guest got out the yellow automobile and drove to Highmount College, went early to bed as those who had earned their rest by good, honest muscle-weariness.

But when the smoke plume streaming bravely from the stack of the mountain-top drilling plant announced the actual beginning of the experiment, Merkley brought news to Tait's. Some-

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thing had gone wrong on the mountain summit; something was continually going wrong. The two young men inhabiting the tumble-down office-building across the railroad-track no longer went to bed immediately after their evening meal. Instead, there were prolonged conferences behind the closed door of the dining-room in the rear.

In addition to this, Rucker, characterized by Merkley as a despised, greasy-handed mechanic, whose burglarish aspect would earn him the attentions of a plain-clothes policeman in any properly Scotland-Yarded city of the world, was sometimes called in to these dining-room conferences, while he, Merkley, once the confidential and trusted valet of his Grace the Duke of Marlford, was excluded. At this point in his narrative, Merkley, being the worse for two or three tiltings of Jeff Walters's or old man Layne's jug of corn whiskey, would become tearful and despondent.

These Merklean hints of a changed condition of affairs on Mount Pisgah were well buttressed by sundry discouraging facts. During the making-ready of the drilling plant everything had gone on fairly well. But dating from the hour when Rucker had first sent live steam whistling into the cylinder of the small portable engine

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which furnished the power, a stream of disaster had trickled discouragingly and persistently upon the experiment.

First the drills went dull and refused to cut the fine-grained sandstone of the plateau; and when Rucker had retempered them, the engine worked water and started a cylinder-head. After the cylinder was repaired, one of the natives who was firing the boiler let the water get too low—to the loosening of some of the boiler-flues, and to the imminent risk of an explosion.

Rucker, handiest of mechanics, calked an entire day on the loosened flues, and the machinery was started again. Two hours later the pivot-bolt of the big timber walking-beam which imparted the up-and-down motion to the drill worked loose; and the walking-beam came down, one end of it narrowly missing Tregarvon, and the other wrecking the machinery to the tune of a hundred dollars and an indefinite interval of waiting for renewals.

It was after this last and most disheartening of the disasters, the only one thus far that Rucker had not been able to repair on the spot, that the two young men once more shut the door of the back-office dining-room upon a disappointed London serving-man.

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"By George! I'm beginning to come around to your view of it, Poictiers," said Tregarvon, cramming his pipe with dry tobacco from the jar set out by Uncle William. "These setbacks are knocking us too regularly to fit decently into any chapter of accidents. I'm beginning to believe they are inspired."

"That is precisely what I have been trying to tell you and Rucker all along, but neither of you would have it that way," rejoined Carfax coolly.

"Well, carry your theory to a conclusion; who's doing it?"

"Ah! now you are getting out to a place where the water is over my head," Carfax admitted, toying delicately with a pipeful of strong "natural-leaf" tobacco. "According to Captain Duncan's prophecy, you have two possible ill-wishers—haven't you?—the C. C. & I. people and the McNabbs."

"Yes; but it is rather incredible on both counts, don't you think? You can hardly imagine a great corporation getting down on its hands and knees to chuck pebbles into the wheels of our little mechanism up on Pisgah."

Carfax nodded. Then he said: "How about the McNabbs?"

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"It seems rather more in their line, you'd say. And yet I haven't a shadow of right to accuse them. So far, they are entirely mythological; a mere name mentioned by Captain Duncan and a few others. So far as I am aware, I have not yet seen a McNabb."

"Whoever it is who is setting these little traps for us is deucedly clever," remarked Carfax, who was still toying half-heartedly with his long-stemmed pipe. "Rucker is fooled, all right; he still insists that it is mere hard luck."

"Yes, and that is another argument against the McNabb hypothesis," Tregarvon put in. "It would take a pretty skilful mechanic to fool Rucker; and from what I can hear, these title-claimants are ignorant mountaineers whose mechanical gifts most probably don't rise beyond the lock action of an old-fashioned squirrel-rifle or the simple intricacies of a ten-quart whiskey-still."

"Which brings us back to the original proposition—the C. C. & I.," suggested Carfax reflectively, and, after a pause: "How long is this last smash going to hang us up?"

"Three or four days. If Rucker gets back from Chattanooga with the new gears by Monday, he will be doing well."

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"All right. To-morrow morning I shall ask you to lend me your yellow chug-wagon. I have a premonition that the spirit will move me to go and run this little mystery of yours into a corner."

Tregarvon laughed good-naturedly. "You'd much better go back to your own stamping-ground and begin to take up your shooting engagements. You can't afford to stay down here monkeying with this last-resort hustle of mine."

The golden youth was looking shrewdly over the smoke wreaths at his companion.

"Is it a last resort, Vance?" he asked quietly, adding: "You have never told me much about the family smash."

"It was complete, Poictiers; an up-to-date, finished product of modern high-finance methods. The Vanderburg crowd got father against the wall in the steel merger, and—well, you'll know how bad it was when I tell you that it killed him. The doctors said pneumonia, but it was really a Wall Street sand-bagging. He didn't leave a will; and when we gathered up the fragments afterward, we knew why he didn't; there wasn't enough to make it worth while. So, you see, the Ocoee is a last resort, for me."

Carfax was musing again.

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"Yet you are going to marry a comfortable little gold mine," he said, after a time.

"Uncle Byrd's Colorado millions?—yes. And I am rather sorry; for Elizabeth's sake, not less than for my own. We were engaged before Uncle Byrd died, and he knew it. It was entirely unnecessary—not to say cruel—for him to leave his fortune to Elizabeth on the condition that she shouldn't change her mind and marry somebody else, and to me in case she did."

Carfax did not comment upon the cruelty. He was perfectly familiar with the terms of Mr. Byrd Tregarvon's will. Instead, he said: "You hear from Elizabeth regularly, I suppose?"

"Oh, certainly. Duty is always written out in large capitals for Elizabeth."

"And you think she writes to you from a sense of duty?"

"We needn't put it just that way. But I have no doubt she conceives it to be her duty to a man she has promised to marry."

"You shouldn't say such things as that, Vance, not even to me," corrected the other man quickly.

"I know I shouldn't. It is only one of the many ways in which Uncle Byrd's millions corrode things. Without meaning to, the old uncle stood matters upon an entirely different, and

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most difficult, footing for us two. We meant to marry: we had passed our word to the various members of the clan that we were going to marry; and the clan was glad because it had always counted upon that outcome for us. So far as a man up a tree might discern, it was a perfectly free choice for both of us."

"Go on," said Carfax, when Tregarvon stopped to refill his pipe.

"Then one day, out of a clear sky, *zip!* comes Uncle Byrd with his will and his millions. After which, of course, Elizabeth can't throw me over without impoverishing herself; and it is equally out of the question for me to let her do it. Moreover, it is imperatively up to me to make good before I marry her. If I don't, uncharitable people will say that I let go of the business end of things because I knew that my wife's money would stop all the holes to keep the wind away. There you have it—sermon length."

Carfax smoked in sober silence for quite a few minutes. Then he said mildly: "Do you know, Vance, I don't more than half like your attitude—as you've just expressed it?"

Tregarvon's smile was a grin.

"Tell me what there is about it that you don't like, and I'll change it, Poictiers. You are by

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long odds the best friend I have in the world, and I'd change a dozen attitudes for you, any day in the week."

"It isn't lover-like," Carfax objected.

"You mean that it is too purely cousinly? I can't very well help that phase of it, you know; we *are* cousins, and we have been trotting around together, more or less, ever since Noah walked out of the ark. Nothing like that for killing sentiment."

"But sentiment shouldn't be killed, if you are going to marry Elizabeth," insisted the purist.

"We have threshed all that out, time and again, down to the final spear of straw, Elizabeth and I," Tregarvon explained carelessly. "At first we did try to galvanize ourselves into some of the sentimental throes, but it was such a ridiculous little comedy that Elizabeth herself called it off. We are sufficiently fond of each other; Uncle Byrd's will is mandatory, and we shall be able to live together without quarrelling. What more could you ask?"

"I don't know," said Carfax thoughtfully. "Your summary fits in pretty accurately with the way of the world. Yet, if I had to change places with either of you, I fancy I should ask a good bit more."

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"If you were Elizabeth Wardwell, you wouldn't ask any more; and if you were Vance Tregarvon, you couldn't. So there you are."

Again there was a smoke-beclouded silence, and into the thick of it Carfax launched a pointed query:

"Have you told Elizabeth anything at all about the girls' school on the mountain—Highmount?"

"Oh, sure; and about the bewitching Miss Birrell, as well. I always tell Elizabeth everything; I haven't sense enough not to."

"And her comment?" asked the golden one half-absently.

"On Miss Birrell, you mean? To tell the brazen truth, I expected a wiggling; not anything like a jealous outbreak, you understand—Elizabeth is miles above that—but some nicely worded, cool-lipped advice about not pitching the conventions out at the window just because I happen to be living a thousand miles from real civilization—Philadelphia civilization."

"And you didn't get it?"

"No, indeed. She didn't say a word about Miss Birrell, specifically, but she wrote me a good cousinly letter in which she told me how glad she was that I needn't deny myself all of the

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social mitigations, and urging me not to let my job on the Ocoee make a one-sided hermit of me. That letter came nearer to making me sentimental over her than anything else she has ever said or done. It did, for a fact."

Carfax did not vote Aye or No on this. He appeared content to let the sentimental matter rest, since he went back to the business difficulties.

"About this last-resort tussle of yours, Vance, I see now why it is mighty necessary for you to make it win, and I wish you had a little better assurance that you are not up against a brace game; that Old Pisgah hasn't stacked the cards on you."

"I can't very well afford to think of that possibility," said Tregarvon grimly.

"No, I suppose you can't. Yet if the genially cynical attitude of the native bystander counts for anything——"

"The loafers over at Tait's, you mean? They'd scoff at anything that smelled of good, honest work."

"I wasn't thinking of them particularly, though they help swell the grand total. But the entire countryside seems to think that you are barking up an empty tree. President Caswell says you are wasting time and money; and that mild-eyed,

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clerical-looking professor of sciences, Hartridge, fairly chortled when I told him what we were doing. You may remember that he strolled over from Highmount the day we started the drill."

"What did he say?" Tregarvon demanded.

"He very pointedly said nothing. But there was a look in his skim-milk eyes that recalled the villain in a play."

Tregarvon was laughing appreciatively. "You have an eye for the dramatic possibilities, always, haven't you, Poictiers? Why should Mr. William Wilberforce Hartridge have it in for me?"

"I can only make a crude guess. Even a mild-eyed professor of sciences may turn, like the trodden worm. You umpire him out of the game pretty ruthlessly when we spend an evening at Highmount."

"With Miss Richardia? Pshaw! you don't suppose that dried-up old stick of a pedagogue—why, it would be Beauty and the Beast!"

Carfax's smile was truly angelic, but it betrayed a wisdom far beyond his years.

"Yes," he rejoined reflectively, "Hartridge may be all of ten years your senior—possibly fifteen. No doubt he ought to be quietly chloroformed and carried behind the scenes. But, as I say, he chortled—with his eyes—when I told him that

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you were planning to drill a series of test-holes, continuing the series until you find the place where your two coal seams come together as one. He is a geologist, among other things, and they tell me he knows this region like a book. I believe I'd cultivate him a little, if I were you; even if it did cost me an occasional *tête-à-tête* with Miss Richardia Birrell."

Tregarvon scoffed hardily at the suggestion, and the scorn was not thrown away upon his companion. Perhaps that was the reason why Catfax, going to bed a little later, without the ministrations of a lachrymose and whiskey-breathing Merkley, opened the back of his watch to gaze long and earnestly at a picture therein, closing the case finally with a little sigh. Millions are good things in their way, but there be pearls, trampled thoughtlessly underfoot by the millionless, which millions cannot buy.

VI

Daddy Layne, and Others

ON the morning after the crash of the walking-beam and the consequent halting of the mountain-top activities, Carfax took the yellow car out of its warehouse garage; and after driving for a half-hour or so up and down the valley road with a tonneauful of speechless but highly delighted children picked up at Tryon's and Jeff Walters's, he pulled up in front of Tait's and went in, ostensibly to buy smoking tobacco, but really to make friends with the country-store idlers.

Cursory observers from an alien North, penetrating now and then to unhackneyed regions in the Cumberlands or the Great Smokies, are apt to find the country folk, either valley or mountain bred, reticent by nature and notably shy of strangers. But there was no resisting the genial and childlike affability of the young man who had been giving the village children joy-rides, who recklessly bought a box of Tait's best two-for-a-nickel cigars and distributed them gen-

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erously as one among friends, and who presently had the hood lifted from the yellow car's motor installation and was explaining, in words of one syllable, the workings of the driving mechanism to a group of curious and deeply interested on-lookers.

The small lecture explanatory gave Carfax a chance to pick his man, and the choice fell upon the elder Layne. Would Mr. Layne like to take a little ride up the road in the car?—just to see how much more easily manageable it was than a horse-drawn vehicle?

Daddy Layne was overwhelmed with embarrassment, and was also secretly puffed up with pride, though he did not yield too easily, a disposition to haggle and make terms being a ruling passion in the Layne nature.

"I 'low I warn't thinkin' none o' takin' a trip this mornin'," he mused reflectively. "Man ortn't to go projeckin' 'round on his'n travels when thar's sech a heap o' work to be done on the place. But then, thar's my married daughter Malviny—her man's coal-diggin' for the C. C. & I., up yander at Whitlow; ef ye could git me thar an' back——"

Carfax assured him that there was nothing easier, and by dint of holding the big car down

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to its slowest speed on the five-mile run to Whitlow he accomplished his purpose, which was to beguile Layne into telling him all that the countryside knew about the C. C. & I., its methods, its local managers, and whether or not the report was true that it made industrial war upon the smaller companies and individual mine owners.

Layne gave him the countryside point of view, which was, of course, inimical to the corporation—to any corporation. The C. C. & I. paid its men next to nothing for digging the coal and then sold it for fabulous prices to the people in the cities; it ran company stores and the miner who refused to buy his supplies thereat was likely to find himself out of a job; when a coal-digger was hurt or killed in an accident, the company's long purse defeated the ends of justice in the damage suit; and so on to the end of the accusative category.

Pinned down to the particulars about the Whitlow, Layne admitted that the young engineer in charge as superintendent was a "squar'" man; but Connolly, the local manager under this superintendent, was, in Layne's description, a man-killer. As to the company's policy toward its competitors, Layne could say nothing definite, the countryside point of view not being pene-

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trative of hidden corporation methods. But it was true that the only mines in operation in the valley belonged to the C. C. & I. Company. Others had been opened from time to time, but they were usually short-lived.

This drawing of Daddy Layne on the drive to Whitlow, and, later, an interview with Connolly, a hard-mouthed Irishman whose crass brutality apparently justified Layne's descriptive epithet of "the man-killer," gave Carfax a clue which he followed patiently until it was time to take Layne back to Coalville; a clue which led to a scraped acquaintance with the local leaders of the Amalgamated Mine Workers, to affable and seemingly pointless talks with all who dared to talk, and finally to a friendly conference with the miner Dockery, Layne's son-in-law.

"The kindling-wood for your obstruction fire is all cut and stacked at Whitlow, Vance," was his dinner-table announcement to Tregarvon at the close of this day of investigation. "I have discovered a number of things. First, that the C. C. & I. methods of benevolent assimilation as directed toward possible competitors have varied from instigating all sorts of trouble in the mines to be squelched up to swallowing them whole in forced sales of stock."

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"That sounds cheerful," said Tregarvon. "Go on."

"Next, they leave it to the local managers to nip any new venture in the bud as effectually and quietly as possible, without bothering the trust headquarters. I took a long chance on Connolly, the assistant superintendent at Whitlow, and got that much of it pretty straight."

"You don't mean to say that he admitted any such thing as that to you, when it is known all up and down the valley that you are interested here with me!" exclaimed Tregarvon, wholly incredulous.

Carfax's smile would have made a blushing debutante envious.

"In Mr. Connolly's office, I was a lost lamb of the flock, looking most pathetically for somebody to lead me home," he rejoined. "A fellow named Tregarvon had got me down here from New York with a view to pulling my financial leg as an investor in some coal property a few miles down the valley—at Coalville, in fact. I enlarged somewhat upon this part of it; kept it up until I was reasonably sure that I had convinced Connolly that I am a woolly sheep, merely waiting for somebody to come along with a pair of sharp shears."

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"Good—ripping good!" Tregarvon chuckled. "You've missed your calling, Poictiers, by all the distance lying between Riverside Drive and the city detective department down-town. But, as you say, you took a long chance; unless Connolly is a bigger fool than he looks to be."

"Didn't I? But Connolly is simply an abysmal brute; a man-driver without any of the little gifts of perspicacity. He took me under his wing like a stepfather-in-law; advised me bluntly to put my money into Consolidated Coal at one-forty rather than to go gunning on my own hook, or yours, or anybody's, in Consolidated Coal's intimate back yard. Pressed a little harder, he hinted that you wouldn't be allowed to dig any real coal out of the Ocoee, providing there were any worth digging—which there wasn't."

"'Wouldn't be allowed, Mr. Connolly?' said I, as lamb-like as possible. 'How could Tregarvon be prevented?'"

"'There's manny a way, Mither Carfax,' he scowled up at me; and then he let the cat out of the pillow-case: 'These young min widout practical experience—'tis manny a blunder they'll be making, and they're soon discouraged entirely. I'm hearing that this same Mither Tregarvin is having throuble to beat the band, and him not fair at the beginning of it yet.'"

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Tregarvon was absently spilling a spoonful of sugar into his after-dinner coffee—a sufficient measure of his interest in Carfax's story.

"From all of which you have argued that there is a C. C. & I. spy in our camp, haven't you, Poitiers?" he said.

"Yes."

"And the remedy?"

"Is to find and fire him."

"The firing part of it will be easy; but the finding is a horse of another color. All of my squad save one or two, I believe, have worked at odd times for the C. C. & I. Every able-bodied man in this region digs coal a little now and then; 'huckleberry miners,' the regulars call them."

"We'll simply have to watch and sift; that's all," said Carfax.

"Well, you've done a good day's work, anyway," was Tregarvon's summing-up of the amateur detective's report. "Candidly, I didn't think you had it in you, Poitiers. You don't look it, you know—to the naked eye."

The angelic smile came and sat upon the clean-shaven, womanish face of the golden youth.

"Don't you know, Vance," he drawled lispingly, "I believe that is my strong point: not looking the ready-made, hand-me-down villain."

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It is foolishly easy to make people take me for a harmless, good-natured scrap-bag into which they can tuck any old thing they don't happen to be needing at the moment. Why, even old Daddy Layne confided in me. Coming home, he told me all about the feud of the family of one of his sons-in-law with the McNabbs. By the way, that reminds me: did you know that you have two of the McNabb cousins in your working gang?—the fellows who call themselves Morgan and Sill?"

Tregarvon had not known it; and a new field of conjecture as to the disasters was promptly opened. Why charge the coal trust with the campaign of obstruction when two of the avowed enemies of Ocoee progress were right on the ground day by day?

Carfax rather sheepishly confessed that his brain had not been capacious enough to entertain two ideas at once. Having fixed upon the coal trust as the trouble source to be investigated, he had completely overlooked the McNabb alternative.

"I'll do time for it, though," he promised. "To-morrow will be Saturday; and if you'll lend me the car again, I'll find out something more about those moonshiners in the Pocket."

Daddy Layne, and Others

“Not alone, you won’t,” Tregarvon objected joyously. “It is going to be my Saturday off, too—and a holiday at Highmount. I’ll go with you, as far as the college, anyway.”

VII

Company Come

ON the day following Carfax's journey of investigation to Whitlow, Tregarvon did not keep his promise to accompany the amateur Vidocq. There were still some repairs to be made on the tramway, and since a working squad of the laborers turned up to round out the week, Tregarvon stayed with his men and became a track foreman again.

Carfax, too, had apparently changed his mind overnight. Instead of driving off up the mountain after breakfast, he headed the yellow car down the valley road and was gone all day. When he returned, late in the afternoon, it was evident that he had discovered some other way of ascending Pisgah. The committee of leisure, sitting, as usual, on Tait's porch, and amusing itself, also as usual, at the expense of an expatriated London serving-man, marked the yellow car returning by way of the mountain pike; observed, further, that Carfax was accompanied by two men, one of whom sprang from the car

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at the turn in the road nearest to the railway and ran to catch a northbound train of coal-empties, so escaping unidentified by the idlers. Carfax's other passenger, well-known to Coalville as "The Bug Professor" at Highmount, descended from the auto more deliberately and went across to the coke-ovens to shake hands with Tregarvon.

"Comp'ny come, over yander," Daddy Layne remarked to Merkley. "Better hump yo'self acrost the track an' git ready to curl yo' boss's ha'r, hadn't ye, English?"

Merkley adjourned himself accordingly, reaching the office-building in time to be sent to show Hartridge the way to the bath-room on the second floor. Carfax made no explanation to Tregarvon about the guest-bringing other than to say that he had captured the professor on the mountain, and had brought him down to take pot-luck of Uncle William's preparing.

"We can eat him all right," said the young mine owner hospitably; "but if we have to sleep him as well——"

"We shan't," Carfax asserted. "I have promised to drive him back to Highmount in the car after dinner."

"Oh, that's better. Who was the other fel-

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low?—the one who jumped out and sprinted for the up freight?”

“Wait,” said Carfax mysteriously; “wait and you’ll find out.” And Tregarvon, having no alternative, had to wait.

The dinner for three in the back-office dining-room followed in due course, and Tregarvon, who brought a working-man’s appetite to the table, let the other two do most of the talking. Carfax proved to be at his captivating best; solicitous for the guest’s entertainment, ingenuous, eager to be informed. Wouldn’t Mr. Hartridge have some more of the—er—rabbit, he thought it must be? And was it really a fact that the entire Cumberland region was underlaid by a vast sheet of bituminous coal?

Tregarvon ate and listened, and presently became aware of two things: that Carfax was persistently threshing the talk around to the coal-measures, and that the professor seemed equally determined to escape from them. A little later, he observed that in this verbal ball-passing Carfax was proving himself the better player. Hartridge was coerced inch by inch; first into talking about the Southern coal-fields in the abstract, and finally into relating the ancient history of the Ocoee; which was the pur-

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pose for which Carfax had baited and set the dinner trap.]

"I suspect Mr. Tregarvon can tell you more about the history of the Ocoee than I can," Hart-ridge demurred modestly, after Carfax had fairly pushed him over the brink; and upon Tregarvon's monosyllabic disclaimer, he went on reflectively: "Let me see; I believe it was about ten years ago that the first company was formed—to the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, as you might say."

"A promoter's scheme?" queried Carfax, alertly inquisitive now.

"Yes. A man from New York—Parker was his name—launched the enterprise; bought a little land, obtained free-will donations of a great deal more, and, as a favor to the benighted natives who had contributed the land, consented to part with about forty-five per cent of the stock of his company at half-price, payable in money."

"Dear, dear; what a world this is!" sighed Carfax gently. "Sold them their own land back again, did he? And then what?"

Hartridge's smile was genially cynical.

"I think it took the able Mr. Parker all of four months, or possibly a little longer, to squeeze

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the local stockholders—the only investors who had contributed any real values—out of his scheme; after which he sold the reorganized Ocoee to a New England syndicate. The Yankees—pardon me; the word is no longer a term of reproach with us—the Yankees meant honestly by the Ocoee; though, of course, they were under no obligation to recognize the frozen-out natives. They spent money liberally in development and on a costly equipment. But it proved to be a bad investment for them—as it had for the natives.”

“Ah,” murmured Carfax. “Now I am better able to understand President Caswell’s attitude. In strict justice, he would say, the mine belongs to those earliest investors who contributed the land and bought the stock; or at least these early people should have an equity in it. These later—er—Yankees had no ethical rights; hence their venture was bound to be ill-starred. By Jove, Tregarvon,”—and here Carfax’s lisp became quite apparent—“that puts the black mark on you, too, doesn’t it?”

If Carfax had any diplomatic designs on the dinner-guest, Tregarvon was not a party to them.

“I only know that my father paid good money for the Ocoee,” he said bluntly; “paid it to these

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same Yankees you are telling us about, Mr. Hartridge, when they were ready to lie down. It is up to me to prove that they didn't stick him as bad as they doubtless believed they were sticking him when they pulled him into it."

Carfax, who was observing the dinner-guest narrowly, saw the sign he had been watching for flit into the pale-blue eyes of Mr. William Wilberforce Hartridge; a half-smile of gratified derision.

"You think Vance isn't very likely to make good on his little brag, professor?" he put in, firing a pointblank shot at the target.

There was no indication that the shot had gone home, unless it lay in the quick veiling of the pale-blue eyes.

"Who am I, that I should take out a license as a prophet of evil, Mr. Carfax?" was the quiet rejoinder. "He is a brave man nowadays who has the assurance to deny anything whatever to youth, vigor, and the spirit of modern industry."

"Still, you believe that Tregarvon isn't going to win out?" persisted the golden youth.

Hartridge laughed.

"As Miss Richardia might put it, I haven't any think coming to me, have I?" he parried.

Carfax gave it up. There was a point beyond

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which he could not press a man who was dipping with him into the common salt-dish, and he felt that the point had been reached.

"It is a pity you can't stay and spend the evening with us, Mr. Hartridge," he said, a little further along, when Uncle William came in to bare the table; but he added nothing to the conventional protest when the professor declared that he must go: on the contrary, he sped the parting guest so nimbly that Tregarvon was scarcely at his third pipe-filling when the purring of the yellow car's motor announced Carfax's return from Highmount.

"I told you so!" was the New Yorker's first word, as he came in to take his place before the handful of fire on the dining-room hearth. "Where is my pipe?"

"What did you tell me?" queried Tregarvon, finding the pipe and pushing the tobacco within reach.

"That Hartridge knows, or thinks he knows, that you are on a false scent up yonder on the Pisgah cliffs: also, that he is deuced glad of it."

"You can see farther into the millstone than I can, if you can draw any such conclusion as that," Tregarvon remarked. "I thought he bluffed you good and plenty."

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"He did; and then again he didn't. I insist that there is something doing, and that this mild-mannered gentleman who teaches mathematics and the natural sciences is in on it. I have just had an experience that was an eye-opener."

"Unload it," said Tregarvon briefly.

"Somebody tried to kill one of us a few minutes ago, and—and I'm afraid Hartridge knew it was due to come off!"

"Nonsense—you're joking!" Tregarvon had come out of his pipe-musings with a bound.

"I'll tell you just what happened, and then you shall judge for yourself. You know that stretch of good road about two-thirds of the way up the mountain?—the longest one there is?"

"Yes."

"Well, just as we turned into it, going up, Hartridge twisted himself in the seat, looked back, and made some sort of a motion with his hand. I was talking; trying to pump him some more; and I don't know why I should have noticed the bit of pantomime. Neither do I know why, coming down a few minutes later, I should have hit that piece of road at a ten-mile-an-hour gait instead of a thirty or forty. It was mighty

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lucky I wasn't speeding. For about two shakes of a dead lamb's tail you stood to lose a good friend and a twenty-five-hundred-dollar car. There was a tree lying across the road at precisely the correct angle to shoot me out into space if I had hit it."

"Heavens!" exclaimed the listener. "Done while you were going and coming?"

"Done while I was going and coming. And that tree was lying at the exact spot where Hart-ridge turned in his seat and made the little signal with his hand to somebody that I couldn't see."

"But, good Lord, Poictiers! It's unbelievable. Why, the man wasn't ten minutes away from his bread-breaking with us!"

"I can't help that. You have the facts."

"What did you do?"

"I stopped, skirmished under the tonneau seat and found your towing rope, and took a hitch on the obstruction. The car was good for it, and I dragged the tree around and rolled it over the embankment. Then I examined the place where it had stood: it had been partly undermined by the road grading, and probably didn't require much of a push to tip it over."

"Then it might have been a sheer accident?"

Carfax was shaking his head. "I thought so

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at first. But when I turned the flash-light on the gap it had left in the upper bank, I saw that it had not fallen accidentally. There are pick marks in the clay, and a crowbar had been thrust in behind the roots to pry with."

"You didn't see or hear anybody?"

"Not a sign. I even went so far as to make a circuit in the woods along the upper embankment. There wasn't a leaf stirring."

"But think a minute, Poictiers: whatever crazy grudge any one might have against me or the Ocoee, it couldn't be made to lap over on you!"

"That's all right; it is your car, and you have usually driven it. You are doubtless the one who had the narrow escape, and I was only your happen-so proxy."

For a thoughtful half-hour they sat before the dying embers of the fire and discussed the murderous attempt in all its bearings, Tregarvon stoutly maintaining to the last that Hartridge could not possibly have been an accomplice. But disregarding that single slight clue, they were left completely in the dark as to the identity or motive of the man or men who had tried to wreck the car.

In the early stages of the discussion Tregarvon

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had suggested the McNabbs; and after every other guess had been exhausted he returned to them. But Carfax demurred at this.

"No," he said. "As I told you yesterday, you have two of the McNabbs in your working gang, and they have had a thousand chances to extinguish you since you came down here. Besides, I've been over in the Pocket neighborhood to-day, and have found out a lot about the clan McNabb. They're perfectly harmless, I should say. I ran across both Morgan and Sill, and they took me in and fed me fat bacon and corn pone. It is all of ten miles to their shack in the Pocket, and they would have had to walk out to get on this side of Pisgah. Besides that, Wilmerding gave me a lot of pointers about the McNabb tribe."

"Who is Wilmerding?"

"He is the man who rode down the mountain with Hartridge and me, and made the quick dash for the up-train. He is the chief of staff for the C. C. & I. in the Wehatchee Valley; has the oversight of all the various mines of the company. He is a fine fellow; a mining engineer with a few German university finishing touches."

"How did you happen to meet him?"

"I hunted him up this morning; drove down to the Cardiff Mine for that purpose. They told

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me yesterday at Whitlow that he was at the Cardiff. I found him, and we foregathered on the spot. He is having some labor troubles, and was about to drive over the mountain to the Swiss settlement at New Basel to see if he couldn't pick up a little new blood. I didn't have to persuade very hard to get him to abandon his horse and buckboard, and I drove him over and back."

"He is all right, you think?"

"As straight as a string. If the C. C. & I. is crooked, he is no party to the underhand work. Also, he told me a lot about the McNabbs. He seems to be quite certain that they have no grudge of their own to work off. Laster McNabb, who is the grandfather of the outfit and the chief of the clan, has talked very freely with Wilmerding about the Ocoee lawsuit, and if the McNabbs have it in for anybody, it is for the lawyer who dragged them into the fight with the New Englanders."

Tregarvon stood up to rest an elbow against the rough stone mantel. "If your estimate of Wilmerding is correct, the C. C. & I. can't be held responsible; and, on the other hand, it doesn't seem to be the mountaineers. Yet we have had the accidents with the drilling machinery,

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and somebody has just tried to assassinate you. You may say it's Hartridge, but I can't follow you there. The motive is lacking."

"Is the motive altogether lacking?" Carfax queried gently.

"You mean that Hartridge may be asinine enough to think that I am trespassing on his preserves at Highmount? That is nonsense. Miss Richardia Birrell and I are merely good friends. Besides that, I don't believe she has ever given the 'bug professor' a second thought, sentimentally."

"Maybe not. But a woman as a factor in any problem is always the unknown quantity," Carfax remarked half musingly. Then he added: "It would be a real charity, both to you and to Professor William Wilberforce, if some outsider would step in and marry Miss Richardia out of the game, don't you think?"

Tregarvon's frown was morose. Slowly but surely the fight with the difficulties, material and mysterious, was working a change in the young man whose chief characteristic had hitherto been finding its principal expression in the light-hearted optimism of those who neither toil nor spin. For the first time in his wealth-smoothed saunter he was coming to hand-grips with the primitive, and

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the quick glance shot at Carfax was almost a challenge.

"Perhaps you'd like to be the outsider, Poitiers? Is that what you had in mind?" he threw in bluntly.

Carfax, gazing reflectively into the heart of the fire embers, took the demand, or assumed to take it, at its face value.

"A chap might do a lot worse," he replied, as one who weighs the pros and cons judicially. "It's a broken family, to be sure, as to its fortunes, but it's good blood. They say that the old judge is as fine as they make 'em; a gentleman of the old Southern school, land-poor, but as proud as Lucifer. The two McNabb boys were telling me about him to-day. They are squatters on Birrell land, as their forefathers were before them, and they'd fight for the old judge at the drop of the hat."

"You haven't answered my question," said Tregarvon pointedly.

Carfax rose and stretched his arms over his head like a man who has put in a full day.

"No; and I'm not going to answer it to-night. Later on, if you still insist on needing a guardian angel, there may be a different story to tell. Where's my candle? I'm going to bed."

VIII

The Stubborn Rock

BY the time Rucker returned from Chattanooga with the repairs for the broken drilling plant, the Saturday-night attempt to wreck the yellow car on Carfax's run down the mountain had become a past danger-signal, and was in a fair way to be overlaid and forgotten in a fresh upturning of the activities.

After the arrival of the new gears one day more was needed for their installation; then the smoke plume began to wave again from the top of the stack on lofty Pisgah, and the drill resumed its interrupted jouncings in the sandstone. In due course, and with no added untoward happenings to delay the work—this though the two McNabbs, identified now and closely watched by Tregarvon, were still retained in the gang—the drill reached the first coal seam, penetrated it, plunged again into rock, and, a few hours later, into and through the second and lower coal layer; net result—failure.

With the new-found fighting resolution now

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fully aroused, Tregarvon did not waste a minute. In the intervals afforded by temporary pauses in the drilling he had found time to select a location farther back on the plateau for the next trial; and while the boiler of the portable engine was still hot from the fire-drawing of failure, the transfer of the plant was begun.

The second trial was a mere repetition of the first, save that the layer of rock separating the two coal seams gained six inches in thickness for the added distance from the original mine opening in the cliff face at the head of the tramway. Wilmerding, the genial young superintendent of the C. C. & I. subsidiaries was on the ground when the sand-pump tests of this second hole were made, and he shook his head doubtfully.

"I suppose I oughtn't to throw cold water; it doesn't come with very good grace from the boss in the enemy's camp," he said deprecatingly. "But I'm mightily afraid you gentlemen are chasing fireflies. You have two distinct seams, instead of one that has been split by a horizontal wedge of the sand-rock, and I believe a careful analysis of the coal in the two seams will prove it. Going to move still farther back and try again?"

"It's the surest thing there is," said Tregarvon,

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who had already set his men at work striking the derrick. "I may be licked, but I'm too big a fool to know it."

"Good!" laughed Wilmerding; "I like your courage immensely. But while you are tapping it again, send me some samples and let me analyze the two veins for you. I have a laboratory up at Whitlow, and I'll be glad to help out to that extent."

"You are an enemy, right, Mr. Wilmerding!" said Tregarvon heartily. "A fighting friend couldn't make a fairer offer than that. But you will find that the two seams are one and the same. I made even canny old Captain Duncan admit that he couldn't detect any difference in the coal taken from the two veins."

Wilmerding nodded. "The captain is canny, as you say, though you can hardly prove it by me. I don't know him very well—haven't been down here long enough. Thaxter knows him from away back, however, and he has told me a good bit about the old Scotchman, who has the reputation, by the way, of being at the top of the heap as an analytical chemist."

"Thaxter?" put in Carfax interrogatively. He had been an attentive listener; his usual attitude in any three-cornered conference.

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"Yes. Don't you know Thaxter, my book-keeper? Not to know Thaxter is to argue yourself unknown in the Wehatchee. The rank and file at Whitlow think I'm the boss, and that Connolly comes next. But Thaxter is the real power behind the throne."

Carfax made the necessary effort of memory and recalled a pousy little man, round-faced, gray-haired and genial, who had beamed up at him through a pair of thick-lensed spectacles on the day when he had invaded the C. C. & I. stronghold at Whitlow.

"I remember him," he told Wilmerding. "Reminded me of one of the Brothers Cheeryble, and I caught myself unconsciously looking about for the other."

Not having read Dickens, Wilmerding lost the point of the comparison.

"Yes," he went on. "Thaxter is It, all right enough. More than anybody else in this neck of woods he is Consolidated Coal: has every coal detail of this entire region down in black on white, neatly docketed and labelled and put away for future reference. I carry him on my pay-roll, but I couldn't any more fire him than I could fire the President of the United States. On the other hand, I shouldn't be sur-

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prised if he could have my head any minute he chose to hold up his finger to the big guns in New York."

"Nice kind of a bombshell to be rolling around under a man's feet," Carfax commented.

"Oh, Thaxter is harmless; he doesn't explode. He is like the assistant secretaries of the Departments in Washington, you know; the fellows who really have the run of the business and stay on the job while the political chiefs come and go. They are like the cat: harmless and necessary and full of wisdom. Which reminds me: I'll bet my wind-broken old nag, here, against your gas-car, Tregarvon, that Thaxter has an analysis of these coals of yours filed away somewhere this very minute. If he has, I'll get it for you. It will be a lot more conclusive than any I could make, offhand, in my laboratory."

So offering, Wilmerding betook himself and his promise to the road leading to Whitlow, leaving the two undismayed coal prospectors on high Pisgah patiently removing their testing plant to a point still farther back from the cliff face. By this time the working gang had acquired the practice which makes perfect; and before the news of the failure of the second attempt had spread beyond the comment of Tait's

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store the drill was churning away in the third of the testing holes, with the lean, bristly-bearded Sawyer acting as drill-master—a post which he had claimed and filled from the first.

“I don’t care how much other people may laugh at you; *I* think your perseverance is beyond praise,” said Miss Richardia, on an afternoon when Tregarvon, scamping his job and snatching a few moments for himself, had driven her and a group of the Highmount young women over in the yellow car to the new location. “I am sure you deserve to succeed—if perseverance by itself ever deserves anything.”

“Why do you say, ‘by itself’?”

“I mean sheer, dogged persistence, without any of the justifying reasons.”

“I have the reasons; I’m obliged to succeed,” was the answer rather gloomily given. Carfax had taken the tonneau party around to the derrick, and the two in the driving-seat of the car had their bit of the mountain-top world momentarily to themselves.

“You say that as if you were sorry,” laughed the music teacher. “Don’t you want to succeed?”

“To want is to desire and need,” he explained meticulously. “Heaven knows, I need success;

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need it awfully. Yet the very reason for needing it is vicarious on one hand, and an exhibition of the meanest sort of purse-pride on the other. But you know all about that."

Truly, Miss Richardia did know. It was during his third evening visit to Highmount, while Carfax was trundling the entire school in batches up and down the cherted pike in front of the college grounds in the auto, and Miss Richardia had been playing to him in the otherwise deserted music-room, that Tregarvon had told her all about the family fortunes, and Elizabeth, and his engagement, and the Uncle Byrd millions. He did not regard it as a breach of confidence at the time; of Elizabeth's confidence or his own. He had merely yielded to an attack of a purely masculine desire to tell all he knew to the nearest woman.

"You still think it is necessary to keep Miss Wardwell waiting?" Miss Richardia was always able to answer his unspoken thought without apparent effort, as he had already learned.

"You wouldn't have me do anything else, would you?" he retorted discontentedly. "Put yourself in Elizabeth's place: what would you think of me if I should take advantage of your good-nature, and so give everybody a chance to

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say that I didn't need to be in love with you—that your money was a sufficient bait?"

Miss Birrell was not at all past blushing, and she did it very prettily.

"You are so boyishly personal!" she laughed, and the fact that she did not resent the personality was an ample measure of the degree to which their intimacy had progressed. And then: "You promised me that you were going to be sensible and straightforward, and all those things. You said you were going to be entirely frank with Eliz—with Miss Wardwell, telling her that you haven't insisted upon her naming the day because you think you ought to have means of your own, first. Have you done this?"

"No, I haven't—not yet."

"Why haven't you? You owe it to her, don't you?"

"Perhaps; but I owe something to myself, too."

Miss Richardia seized upon the admission swiftly and turned it as a weapon against him. "You do, indeed! You owe it to Mr. Vance Tregarvon not to keep any of the anchors in reserve. As you once said, yourself, you are too impressionable."

"A light o' love," he laughed. "I must tell Elizabeth what an eloquent special pleader she

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has unconsciously acquired down here in the wilds of Tennessee. What have I done that I ought not to have done?"

"I am not your conscience," was the cool-voiced reply.

"But you are," he retorted accusingly. "You tell me what I ought to do, and I promise to go and do it. My intentions are always good."

"I am not sure of even that much, now. You have changed very remarkably in the past few weeks, and you must forgive me if I say that the change hasn't been altogether for the better. You were just a nice, cheerful boy when you came to Tennessee, and you're not that any more."

"I have good reasons, and plenty of them," he blurted out. "Do you want to hear them?"

"Not when you talk that way," said Miss Birrell, and her attitude became suddenly indifferent.

"You shall hear them, whether you want to or not," he broke in almost roughly. "I have the whole world against me on this Ocoee proposition; I have given my word to Elizabeth when I don't love her as the man who is going to marry her ought to love her; and——"

"That is quite enough," she interposed quietly.

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"It only proves what I said a minute ago. You can't afford to hold any of your anchors in reserve. I think we had better join Mr. Carfax and the young women. Don't you?"

"No. And I call that downright cruel, when we see so little of each other, and I almost never have you to myself any more."

"It is your saying such things as that that makes me think I ought to be cruel. There are times when you need cruelty. Nothing milder would do any good."

"You may as well say the remainder of it," he prompted.

"I shall. It is really serious. You must come to a better understanding with Miss Wardwell; and you must stop coming so often to Highmount."

"The first time I went to Highmount you told me that I might come as often as I pleased. You needn't worry about the school-girls. If you say the word, I'll never speak to one of them again unless she is duly chaperoned at the moment."

"We were speaking of Miss Wardwell," was the rather chilling reminder.

"Well, we will speak of her, then. She isn't losing any sleep on my account. If you only knew Elizabeth as well as I do—but what's the use!"

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"There appears to be no use at all, and I have already said more than your nearest friend ought to say. Suppose we talk of something else."

Tregarvon refused flatly to accept the invitation.

"No; I want to know about my welcome at Highmount. I have had Mrs. Caswell's warrant in the past. I have it yet. You can't make me stay away."

Miss Richardia's pretty chin went up a quarter of an inch.

"Then you will compel me to be disagreeable; and I don't like to be that. I always have plenty of work to do in the evenings; quite a number of the young women would like to take extra music lessons, and I have a piano in my rooms."

Tregarvon gasped. "You don't mean that you'd be hard-hearted enough to shut yourself up? to refuse to see me? That would be—but I simply can't contemplate it. You—you don't know what your confidence and your clear insight have come to mean to me!"

"On the contrary, it is because I do know, or rather because I know how you are justifying yourself, that you must——"

"But I shall not! It is just a frank, open friendship that has grown very precious to me, Richardia. Put it upon the lowest possible

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grounds; say that it amuses you and doesn't hurt Elizabeth—I could show you letters from her in which she actually encourages it—and add to these that it does me a whole lot of good. Why should you freeze up right in the midst of it, just when I am needing all the encouragement I can get?"

Miss Birrell did not wish to laugh, but his protest, the shocked pleading of a little boy who fears he is about to be deprived of his customary piece of bread and butter with sugar on it, was too much for her self-control. None the less, she would not yield a hair's breadth.

"You can't convince me, and you needn't try," she declared. "Granting what you say—that it amuses me and doesn't hurt any one else—there are still the conventions to be considered. Perhaps you think, because you are a thousand miles from Philadelphia, that there are no conventions. If you do, you are greatly mistaken. Highmount, for example, has a complete equipment of them."

"Confound the conventions!" growled Tregarvon. Carfax was leading his following back to the car, and the end of the confidential talk was approaching.

"No, you needn't swear at them," said Miss Richardia, with honey in her tone. "More than

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that, you would be the last person in the world to want to have them confounded. In your proper environment, I can picture you as an exceedingly correct person; one who would protest most vigorously if his sister should——”

She did not finish, because the others were within hearing distance; but the sentence was sufficiently complete to point the comparison for Tregarvon. He bent over the steering-wheel and pretended to be trying the connections of the substitute battery coil. The feint permitted him to say in low tones: “You are altogether right—as you always are. I’ll be as decent as I can: and it will cost more than you think.”

After which he descended from the driving-seat and shifted the responsibility of the return of the party to Highmount over to Carfax, saying that since the drill was doubtless nearing the coal depth, he would better stay on the job.

He was late getting down the mountain that evening, having worked his crew overtime to settle a disputed point with Rucker. The dispute, or rather its outcome, was sufficiently explained in his announcement to Carfax when he tramped into the office dining-room and dropped wearily into a chair before the fire.

“One more slap in the face, Poictiers. We

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found the coal about two hours ago, and a little later the drill landed upon the sandstone layer again. I'm too tired to know whether it's discouragement or just plain leg-weariness and back-ache, but I feel as if something had gone out of me."

Carfax rose to the occasion with his customary cheerful alacrity.

"We're not going to say die, yet a while, Vance, old man. It merely means another try. If you are running low in the ammunition-chest——"

"No, it isn't that; it isn't costing so terribly much. But to tell the blank truth, I don't know where to go with the drill for another try. We are a good quarter of a mile back from the tramway head now; an almost impracticable distance, even if we had found the big vein."

"Well, what is the matter with swinging around the circle a bit? You have latitude as well as longitude, haven't you?" said Carfax the comforter.

"Oh, yes; there is Ocoee land enough. And I guess that is about the last hope."

"Which way had you thought of moving, north or south?"

"Whichever way you say," was the spiritless reply.

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Carfax took a coin from his pocket and balanced it upon his thumb. "Heads, Highmount way; tails, toward Whitlow," he called, and flipped the coin.

It fell heads uppermost, deciding for the Highmount direction; and when Tregarvon would have picked the coin up to return it, Carfax stopped him.

"Let it alone; I'm superstitious to-night. Uncle William will be in with your warmed-over dinner in a minute: let him pick it up and keep it—for good luck." And a little while afterward, when the old negro shuffled in with the covered tray: "There is a dollar on the floor which we are both afraid to touch, Uncle William. Don't you want it?"

The old man scraped a foot and said: "Sarvent, suh," but he arranged the table to the final nicety before going around to look at the money on the floor.

"Now, Marsteh Poictiers, whut-all is de matter wid dat dollah?" he asked, bending, hands on knees, to eye it suspiciously.

"There is nothing the matter with the dollar, uncle; the trouble is with us. We are afraid of it."

"Sho' now! Is you? Dat look lak a mighty

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rightchus dollah to me. Dat ain't no debbil's money, is it?"

"You'll have to settle that for yourself. Since the dollar came out of my pocket a few minutes ago, I shall be justified in refusing to answer so personal a question as that relating to its righteousness."

"*Hyuh! hyuh!* It comed out of yo' pocket, an' yit you is skeered of it? Dat look mighty cur'is to me. Look lak you-all is tryin' to play trick on de ol' man, Marsteh Poictiers. I ain't seed no white folks' money yit dat I's skeered of," and he bent cautiously to pick it up.

"Look out, Uncle William; it might burn you!" said Carfax suddenly; and quite as suddenly the old negro dropped the coin and started back.

"Bless gresshus! but dat *wuz* hot!" he exclaimed, blowing upon his fingers. And then: "Des you keep yo' eye on dat dollah, ef you please, suh, twell I come back, an' I'll fix 'im," and a little later he returned from the cook-house with a small tin pan which he turned down over the piece of money.

"Ef dat won't be in you gemmans' way, an' you-all 'll des leab 'im dah, I gwine come back bimeby an' tek de cunjer off 'im. I ain' gwine lef de ol' debbil hab dat dollah, not ef it is his'n."

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The little diversion did for Tregarvon what Carfax had hoped it might; and after the belated meal was eaten and the pipes were lighted, the atmosphere of disheartenment was changed somewhat for the better.

"There is one thing we have to be thankful for," the disappointed one volunteered, when his reflections began to mellow in the tobacco smoke. "We haven't heard from the enemy since the attempt was made to ditch the car, and there haven't been any more of the unaccountable accidents to the machinery."

"That is so," said Carfax. "And I have been trying to guess, all along, why he—or they—stopped so abruptly."

"There wasn't any good reason why he—or they—should have begun," said Tregarvon musingly.

"Somebody evidently thought there was a reason, and afterward changed his mind. Why should he change his mind? That is the question that has been puzzling me."

"Perhaps he has found out what a good fellow I really am, and is no longer bloodthirsty," put in Tregarvon, who was too tired to make any very heavy drafts upon his mentality.

"You haven't any notion that the fight, if

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there is one, is personal to you, have you?—excluding Professor Hartridge, of course.”

“Oh, no; I was only joking. And we’ll always exclude Hartridge, if you please; I’m still refusing to believe it of him. It was probably somebody’s intention to drown the blind kitten of an Ocoee before it had time to get its eyes open; but the somebody couldn’t, by any stretch of imagination, be Hartridge.”

“But why has the somebody—who isn’t Hartridge—called the fight off so suddenly? By Jove, Vance—I have an idea! It has dawned upon the enemy, whoever he is, that it wasn’t worth while to efface us at a time when we were perseveringly going the right way about it to efface ourselves! I’d like to make a bet with you: when we begin drilling in the right place—if there is any right place—the trouble will blossom out again. What do you think?”

“I haven’t a thought left that isn’t too leg-weary to keep up with you,” Tregarvon confessed; whereat he fell to talking of Miss Richardia Birrell, dribbling on until Carfax, groaning in spirit, got up to light the bed-room candles.

IX

A Bad Night for Rucker

AFTER the drilling plant had been moved to the chance-chosen, fourth trial site a short half-mile south of the original line of prospect holes, the work of reinstallation was begun. At its completion, it was at Rucker's suggestion that the small tool-house was fitted with a single-sashed window and a folding cot-bed, and that the duties of night-watchman were added to his daytime oversight of the drilling machinery.

Just why the plant, which had been left unguarded since the first week of the campaign, and had been unmolested, should now need a night-watchman, the mechanician did not attempt to explain. His reasons for wishing to transfer his lodgings from the valley to the mountain top were entirely personal. He had been taken as a boarder at the Tryons', and to wear out the dull evenings after working hours, he had been drawn first into the lounging circle at Tait's store, and later into the smaller circle of the Layne household on the lower valley road.

The loadstone at Layne's was a granddaughter

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of the patriarch's, a black-eyed, red-lipped girl of primal passions and impulses; and in the beginning Rucker had been given a fair field and no questions asked as to his eligible state and standing. Evening strolls on the country roads with Nancy Layne for a companion were not to be compared with a night off on Broadway under the bright lights; but such diversions were made to suffice until a day when Daddy Layne, abruptly pointing to the long-barrelled squirrel rifle resting on its pegs over the kitchen fireplace, assumed the aggressive. "Git yo' license an' yo' preachuh, 'r let Nan alone an' quit projec'in' round this yer valley o' nights," was the old man's ultimatum; and Rucker, having a wholesome fear of consequences, and the best of reasons for not applying for a marriage license, asked permission to sleep at the drilling plant.

The first night on the mountain was frankly harrowing to the city-bred mechanic, whose burglarish aspect did not insure him against the still alarms of the forest intensified by moon-flung shadows of solemn trees, by scurrings of fallen leaves rattling like dry bones under the autumn night-wind, and, more than all, by a sense of complete and lonely isolation.

Each unfamiliar sound brought Rucker out of

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his cot-bed blankets with a bound and sent him groping to the square window. First it was a little screech-owl, perching on the walking-beam of the drill, and chattering out its blood-curdling cry. Next it was a slow and measured crashing in the undergrowth, sound mysterious and unnerving to a degree until the night-prowling cow responsible for it lowed gently and crossed the clearing to snuff suspiciously at the boiler and machinery.

The tension once more relieved, Rucker tumbled into the blankets again, calling himself shop names and swearing by all the gods of the metal-workers that nothing short of a forest-fire or an earthquake should make him lose any more sleep. Yet, while he was still only eye-deep in his first doze a new alarm brought him leaping to his feet and sent him, blinking and breathing hard, to the square of moonlight framed by the small window.

What he heard this time sounded like the measured hoof-beats of a horse. Rucker had a pocket flash-light, and he turned it upon the face of his watch. He had gone early to bed, and it was still early, barely ten o'clock. A by-road, the one by which the drilling plant had been brought in, ran through the wood a little distance

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to the left of the glade. Staring wide-eyed, Rucker made out the shadowy bulk of a wheeled vehicle standing in this road, with a white horse, seemingly of incredible size, looming gigantic between the thills.

The mechanican got his breath, and his heart began to pump in steadier rhythm. A horse and buggy betokened the presence of humankind, and Rucker was not a coward of men. Moreover, the ball-peen machinist's hammer, lying within easy reach, was no mean weapon of defense in the grasp of a man who knew how to swing it.

Obsessed by the idea that he might shortly have to resort to the hammer, the mechanican was wholly unprepared for what followed. Slowly, and as if they were materializing out of the shadows of the wood, two figures glided into the watcher's field of vision: a man, tall, stately, wearing the long coat and the wide-brimmed soft hat which even an unobservant Rucker knew to be the garmentings of the old-fashioned Southern gentleman. And, hanging on the man's arm, a woman, small and trimly clad.

They came only to the edge of the open glade. The woman's hat left her face in shadow, so that even if the light had been better, Rucker could not have seen what she looked like. The

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man's back was turned to him, and here, again, he was at fault. Nevertheless, he was presently able to postulate the man's gestures as those of anger, and to understand that the woman was pleading with him. It was etched out wholly in pantomime; Rucker could hear nothing. Twice or thrice the man made an inclusive motion with his free hand as if indicating the glade as the subject of whatever he was saying; and finally he balled his hand into a fist and shook it wrathfully at the unoffending drill derrick.

This went on for some moments, the woman, Rucker fancied, trying to end it and draw the man away. Whether as the result of her efforts, or for some other reason, the scene ended as abruptly as it had begun. The two figures turned and faded into the wood shadows as mysteriously as they had come out of them; and while Rucker was still straining his eyes to keep them in sight, the horse and buggy vanished to a soft thudding of hoofs on the sandy road.

After this apparition had disappeared, the machinist filled his black cutty pipe, opened the door of the tool-house, and sat upon the step to smoke and ruminate and strive for a better collecting of things into their normal groupings. Later, he strolled out to the by-road to see if the

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hoof and wheel marks were really there; to satisfy himself beyond question that he had not been dreaming. The ocular demonstration convinced him that he was sane, sober, and awake. The hoof-prints were there, though they were by no means so gigantic as he had expected to find them; and so were the wheel ruts.

"I guess I needn't be botherin' my head about who they was," he muttered to himself as he went back to his seat on the tool-house doorstep. "Th' bosses'll know that, all right, all right. But if there's goin' to be a whole lot of this ghost business up here, it's me for the downstairs, even if I do have to duck every time I see old man Layne comin' up th' road. These moon-light picture-shows get next to my gizzard-nerve. I ain't no ghost-killer—not me."

His pipe was smoked out and, knocking the ash from the bowl, he got up, having fresh designs upon the tool-house bed-room and the blanketed cot. But he was scarcely afoot before the sounds of wheels and hoofs came again, this time from the opposite direction.

"My gosh!" he complained, "are they comin' back? Or is it a torchlight procession of 'em? No, by jing! it's somebody else: that horse is a black one!"

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More to be out of harm's way than for any spying purpose, he slipped into the tool-house and softly closed and fastened the door. When he tiptoed to the window two other figures had entered the glade; two men, and both of them with burdens.

Their movements were even more mysterious than those of the earlier visitors. The shorter of the two carried a square box, handling it by a buckled strap which encircled it, and the other had a shoulder load which Rucker could liken only to a small bundle of poles. Both burdens were quickly put down; and at Rucker's final glimpse, obtained just as the moon was passing behind a cloud, the shorter man had gone down on his knees beside the box, and was apparently opening it.

Everything turned to a blurred gray for the watcher at the square window while the cloud obscured the direct rays of the moon; and when a better light came, the taller of the two men had disappeared, and the other was standing motionless under a great oak, whose spreading branches were sadly obstructing Rucker's line of sight.

"Now, what the devil is he doin'?" was Rucker's demand, whispered to the inner darknesses. "And where has t' other guy skipped to, all of a

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sudden. By jinks! I b'lieve the short one's sightin' a gun; no, it ain't a gun, either; it's a kodak. No, I'm off again, and I hain't got any more guesses. Now, what t' 'ell's the sawed-off doin', wavin' his arms up and down that way? By golliess, this whole mountain's gone bug-house, 'r else I have!"

Rucker watched the arm-waving for a full minute before it dawned upon him that the short man who seemed to be sighting something was making signals. The small square window of espial commanded nothing but the glade. The watcher crept cautiously to the end of the room facing toward the near-by brow of the mountain. The moonlight helped him to find the knot-hole he was looking for, but for a time the contracted field of vision revealed nothing but a forest tangle of moon-spattered shadows.

Rucker had the patience of his craft, and the practical reasoning power that goes with it. The man under the oak was evidently signalling to some one to the eastward of his position at the edge of the glade: Rucker's knot-hole in the plank-ing at the end of the tool-house covered the same field: hence the eye at the knot-hole should be able to descry what was apparently visible to the eyes under the spreading oak.

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The mechanic stuck to his hypothesis until finally the fact proved it to be the true one. Far down among the trees, almost at the cliff's edge, Rucker thought, a dancing light, such as might be made by a flaring pine torch, flashed up, flickered, and disappeared. The general aspect of the mystery remained as impenetrable as before, but one point became clear. The man under the tree was waving to the man with the torch, and some purpose, quite well understood by both, was getting itself forwarded.

Rucker stayed at his peep-hole until the torch reappeared, flared steadily in one place for a few seconds, and then went out as suddenly as if a gust of wind had extinguished it. After which he tiptoed back to his window, and was there, looking on curiously, when the torch-bearer came tramping up from the eastward. There was a little delay when the upcomer joined the man under the oak. The watcher saw them taking the sighting mechanism, whatever it might be, apart and depositing some portion of it carefully in the square box; saw the two men resume their respective burdens and thread their way rapidly among the trees to the waiting vehicle. Then came the grinding protest of buggy wheels cramped short to turn in the narrow by-road,

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the *shough* of a horse, minishing hoof-beats, and silence.

By this time Rucker was beginning to stand somewhat less in awe of a forest wilderness which seemed, after all, to be anything but an uninhabited solitude. A fresh filling of the short black pipe was the preliminary to a careful scrutiny of the ground under the spreading oak-tree. There was but a thin layer of sandy top-soil overlying the rock through which the drill was to be churned on the morrow, but it sufficed to reveal what Rucker was looking for—three conical indentations made by the sharply pointed ends of a tripod, the stand of the sighting mechanism, level, transit, or telescope, used by the shorter of the two men.

This much proved, Rucker went back to the tool shanty, found and lighted a lantern, and with it steered a course between the trees to the eastward point where the torch-bearer had stood. It took him several minutes to discover the exact spot; but when it was found and identified by the remains of the extinguished pine-knot torch, he whittled a small stake and with a stone for a hammer drove it to mark the place.

"There, by heck!" he said, when he was once more sitting on the tool-house door-step to finish

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his pipe. "If I hain't got funny business enough to keep the bosses guessin' f'r a week 'r so, I'll sit up a few minutes longer and pull down some more."

It was far past midnight when he found himself nodding over the smoking lantern, and got up to go and tumble sleepily into his bed. And this time neither the shrilling of the katydids and tree-toads nor the screeching of the little owl that came once more to perch upon the drill walking-beam, kept him awake.

X

Blind Alleys

THERE was a council of war, held without preliminaries, to follow Rucker's report made to his two employers on the morning after the night of mysterious alarms. The small tool shanty served as the council-chamber, and the councillors were only two, Rucker having been heard and dismissed to take his place as chief mechanic in the drilling squad.

"Talk about fourteen-fifteen puzzles and the fourth dimension: this masquerade puts the kibosh on them all," remarked Carfax, opening his pocket-case of freshly imported cigarettes. "Or are you wiping the slate clean by charging Billy Rucker with a bad supper or a drink or so too many?"

Tregarvon shook his head.

"It is too circumstantial to be a nightmare. Besides, there are the two sets of wheel tracks in the road, and the marks of the tripod under the oak; likewise the burnt pine torch and Rucker's stake to mark the place of it. It's no pipe-dream—more's the pity."

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"Then what the deuce is it?—or they?—since there seem to have been two distinct sets of phenomena."

Again the owner of the Ocoee shook his head.

"I think we may safely assume that Rucker saw two acts in the same play. But what the play may have been is beyond my wildest guess. Rucker's suggestion that we've dropped down into a neighborhood of crazy people seems to fit better than anything else."

Carfax was sitting on the cot with his hands locked over one knee. "It is rather pointedly our job to chase the shy guess into a corner, don't you think? There is mischief in it. One's bosom friends would hardly come here at night to shake their fists at things, or to run surveyors' lines by moonlight."

Tregarvon got up to tramp the floor, but there was no room in the cluttered tool shanty and he sat down again upon a coil of rope.

"Damn this crazy Southern mining country!" he rapped out. "Rucker is right: I believe it's peopled with escaped lunatics fresh from Bedlam! You've got a theory, Poictiers; I can see it in your eye. Put it in words. Whom do you suspect?"

"Small minds suspect: larger ones reason

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calmly," said the golden youth in mild irony. "The thing for us to do first is to establish a few identities, if we can. Who were these late-in-the-evening visitors? Let's take them in their natural order; first come, first served. Rucker seems to have had a fair eye-shot at the man in a soft hat and long-tailed coat. Doesn't his description of the man's clothes and figure throw at least a suggestion into you?"

Tregarvon frowned. "You've got Hartridge on the brain," he retorted. "You can travel anywhere in the South and still find plenty of men who wear soft hats and full-skirted Prince Alberts."

"Yes; quite so. But we have met only one on Mount Pisgah, thus far, and his name is William Wilberforce Hartridge. And if we take Mr. Hartridge for the fist-shaking gentleman, the next step—the identity of the lady—is simplified."

"I don't see it," Tregarvon objected sourly.

"You mean you won't see it. What woman, from Highmount, would be most likely to be Mr. Hartridge's companion on a moonlight evening drive? Don't let your prejudices, or rather your prepossessions, make a blind mule of you, Vance."

"I suppose you mean that the woman was

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Richardia Birrell. It doesn't necessarily follow, and I don't believe it."

"It isn't so dreadfully hard to believe. There is no reason why she shouldn't go driving with the professor of mathematics, if she feels like it. Neither is there anything especially culpable in the fact that she walked down here with him when he came to shake his professorial fist at your drilling-machine. When you have cooled down sufficiently, we'll go and see if my little primary guess won't prove out."

"I'm cool enough," was the answer to this; and together they went to seek the proof.

The buggy tracks in the damp sand of the little-used road were not hard to trace, and there were places where the hoof-prints of the horse which had been driven toward Highmount were clean-cut and distinct. Carfax was a spoiled son of fortune only in his affectations. Beneath the carefully cultivated fopperies there was a keen, active mentality which rarely missed its mark and never fumbled. He made pencil sketches of the hoof-prints on the back of an old letter in passing, and it was he, and not Tregarvon, who noted the single peculiarity in the horse's shoeing; a missing corner from the toe-calk on the left hind foot.

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As the New Yorker's hypothesis had assumed, the buggy tracks led directly to Highmount; or at least the assumption seemed a fair one. The two investigators did not follow the vehicle trail all the way to the college gates; could not, since the trail-recording wood road came out into the hard-metalled mountain pike a few hundred yards below the Highmount grounds, and the wheel marks were no longer visible. But there seemed to be no reasonable doubt of the correctness of Carfax's guess; and Tregarvon admitted as much on the way back to the starting-point.

"Mind you, I'm not admitting that Richardia was a party to anything underhanded or crooked," he added in qualification. "She may have been driving with Hartridge; as you say, there isn't any particular reason why she shouldn't go buggy-riding with him if she wishes to; and she may have walked down to the glade with him. I don't say that she didn't; but I do say that she isn't tangled up in any of the disreputable mysteries, knowingly."

"Oh, no; I'd be as loath to admit that as you are," said Carfax gently. "In fact, it is barely possible that I have the better right to defend her. We'll put it all up to Hartridge. The next thing is to find out, if we can, where Hartridge

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got his two surveyors on such short notice, and what it was that could be proved or disproved by a transit sight taken in the moonlight under conditions which must have barred anything like mathematical accuracy. Where are your blue-prints of the Ocoee property?—down below, or up here?”

The map copies were in the tool-house, one set of them; and when they were found, Carfax spread them out on the cot and pored over them thoughtfully.

“You are not trespassing on somebody else’s land, at all events,” was the verdict, rendered after he had verified the position of the glade in which the fourth test-hole was being driven. “It is all Ocoee in every direction; your land covers all this part of the mountain. By the way, what is this name, ‘Westwood,’ written across these mountain-top plats?”

Tregarvon did not know, and he said so; adding that he supposed it might be the name of the original owner of the land.

“Who is he? Ever hear of him?”

“I don’t recall that I have. But that is not singular. I haven’t had occasion, or the time, to dig very deeply into ancient history.”

“Well, there doesn’t seem to be anything very

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illuminating about these blue-prints, save that they establish your perfect right to bore holes almost anywhere you please," said Carfax. "Suppose we go now and take up the trail of the two surveyors."

The track of the second buggy proved to be a short scent soon lost. Within a hundred yards of its turning-point opposite the glade the buggy had left the wood road, the tracks swerving to the right in a direction opposite to that taken by the earlier vehicle; and neither the wheels nor the hoofs of the horse had left any impress on the thick carpeting of fallen leaves under the trees; or none that amateur trailers could see and follow.

They were returning down the by-road when a crash and a hoarse roar of escaping steam notified them that once more something had gone wrong with the machinery. Carfax threw up his head like a thoroughbred starting in a race.

"We have been hunting for causes," he snapped: "there is effect number one, right now! I can outrun you to the home plate!"

They came upon the scene, neck and neck, just after Rucker had stopped the engine and opened his fire-door. The walking-beam had fallen again, carrying down a portion of the der-

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rick framework; and the mountaineer whose name on the pay-roll appeared as "Morgan," and who had been drill-turning in Sawyer's place at the moment, was caught and held under the wreckage.

Happily, the man was neither killed nor very severely injured. A few minutes' quick work, to which everybody lent a hand, sufficed to extricate him from the mass of broken timbers; and a rather ugly scalp wound, which Carfax proceeded deftly to wash and dress and bandage, figured as the worst of his hurts.

Tregarvon sent the man home in charge of the other masquerading McNabb; and then came the reckoning with the smashed drilling plant.

"What are we in for this time, Rucker?" was the owner's question, put after the machinist had measured the damage with a critical eye.

"Mostly a couple o' days' hang-up, I guess. Leave me a man or two to help me blacksmith, and I'll see what I can do. But what's eatin' me is, what done it?"

There seemed to be no categorical answer to this, the cause of the breakdown being as yet well hidden in the *débris* of the effect. Tregarvon was willing to charge it to the chapter of accidents, but Carfax was less easily satisfied.

"If it were the first," he demurred; "but it

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isn't. There is an entire series behind it. And, coming right on the heels of the little mysteries of last night . . . I'm of the opinion that this is the beginning of more hostilities, Vance." Then to Rucker: "How far did you get the hole down, Billy?"

"Not more than a couple o' feet."

"Drilling hard?" asked Tregarvon.

"Um-m-m; middlin' hard; 'bout like the one we put down over yonder at the head of the tramway—the first one we drilled."

Tregarvon told off three of the laborers to help Rucker, and sent the remaining three back to Coalville to report to Tryon, who, with another small squad, was replacing rotted cross-ties on the lower end of the tramway. After this, he beckoned to Carfax, and they went together down the shallow glade ravine to the spot where Rucker had found the burnt pine-knot torch and had driven his marking stake.

Out of hearing of the four men left at the drilling-stand, Tregarvon said: "Well, the McNabbs are eliminated, definitely. It is fair to assume that a man wouldn't be so careless as to get caught in a trap of his own setting."

"You would think not," was Carfax's rejoinder; but he did not say that it was impossible.

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On the ground where the torch-bearer of the previous night had stood they searched carefully for something that might give a working clue to the mystery of the moonlight survey. There was nothing, unless an oak-tree, with a half-overgrown "blaze" and some ancient markings cut in it, might be called a clue.

Two or three hundred feet below the scarred oak lay the cliff edge, at this point something less than a precipice. Tregarvon stood on the brink, looking down over the rough, broken talus. A hundred yards below his perch the gray ribbon of the mountain pike leading to Coalville wound in and out among the trees and huge boulders. Farther around to the left, and almost on a level with the broken talus, he could see the head of the Ocoee tramway. At once he called Carfax's attention to the favoring topographies.

"If we should find our big vein anywhere between here and the tramhead, it would be almost as accessible as the old opening," he said. "The track could be continued on an easy curve and grade, and there is drop enough to give us the gravity haul. I wonder if any one has ever looked along here for the outcrop?"

Viewed from the summit, the rough declivity, rocky, wooded, and thickly covered with a matted

Blind Alleys

tangle of brier, laurel, and undergrowth, looked as if it had never been trodden by the foot of man. Carfax, leaning against a tree which grew on the extreme edge of the cliff, gave it as his opinion that the rocky slope had never felt the prospector's pick.

"They have to dig trenches or holes or something, in prospecting for coal, don't they?" he asked; and when Tregarvon confirmed the surmise: "I should say that this toboggan-slide is just as old Madam Nature left it, shouldn't you? Can we get from here to the tramhead without going back and around and over the mountain?"

"Easily," said Tregarvon, and he swung out and dropped over the low cliff to lead the way along the broken ledges.

It was while Carfax was lowering himself with more care than Tregarvon had taken, with the leaning tree to help, that he made a small discovery and called Tregarvon back. On its outer or valley-facing side the leaning tree carried a "blazed" scar with markings similar to those on the white-oak half-way between the cliff and the glade. Like the other scar, this one was old, and the bark had long since healed around the edges of the ax-wound. But the markings, which

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were cut into the heart-wood, were still quite distinct.

"Well?" said Tregarvon, after they had examined the scar together, "what do you make of it?"

Carfax was pencilling the mark on the back of the letter upon which he had sketched the damp-sand hoof-prints.

"I don't know. It looks something like the Greek letter ' π ', a capital 'T' with two stems, don't you think? But, of course, that is only a coincidence."

"Is it, though?" queried Tregarvon thoughtfully.

"It must be. What woodsman in this part of the world would ever mark a tree with a Greek letter?"

"No woodsman, perhaps; but a schoolmaster might. Poitiers, I am slowly coming around to your point of view. Hartridge is at the bottom of all these smash-ups and mysteries. I hate to believe it of him, but everything leans in his direction."

"It looks that way, doesn't it? But the admission of the fact doesn't clear up the mysteries. Say that, for some reason, sentimental or other, Hartridge wishes to drive you out—make you quit. That might explain the smash-ups and the

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hindrances; but it doesn't begin to explain why we should find these marks of his—if they are his—made on these two trees years and years ago; or why he should send a pair of surveyors up here to make monkey motions in the moonlight.”

Tregarvon was leading the way along the ledge toward the tramhead.

“We shall probably find out more about all these things before we are much older on the job,” he replied; and then, vengefully: “If I can catch him at it, I promise you I'll make him sorry!”

After they reached the head of the inclined track and had signalled to Tryon at the foot to let them down in the tip-car, Tregarvon outlined his plan for the broken day.

“We'll go down and get out the auto and my engineering instruments, motor back to the drilling plant, and do a little surveying on our own account. Beyond that, you may take the car and kill time with it as you please. I'll stay and help Rucker.”

The programme was carried out in due course. By ten o'clock they were back on the mountain top with the surveying instruments. Placing the transit upon the tripod marks under the tree on the edge of the glade, Tregarvon took a forward

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sight to the eastward, with Carfax holding the target-staff on the spot where the burnt torch was found. Then, without changing the position of the instrument, Tregarvon signalled Carfax to go back, halting him at the cliff edge, and moving him to right and left until the target was once more in line with the cross-hairs of the telescope.

"What developments?" he inquired, when the staff-bearer came up.

"Nothing startling. Your line of sight merely picked up the second of the two marked trees, whatever significance that may have."

"You may be sure it has some significance, if we were shrewd enough to figure it out," Tregarvon asserted. Then: "What will you do with yourself until dinner-time?"

"Oh, I don't know; chase around in the car awhile, maybe, if you can't use me here. Perhaps I may be able to pick up a clue or so—if I can find anybody to talk to."

Tregarvon stripped off his coat and went to work with Rucker and the helpers, and in this manner the better part of the day was accounted for. Late in the afternoon, when the blacksmithing of new irons left him without an occupation, he yielded to a prompting which had been urging him all day, and went for a long tramp which took

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him over the route covered by the drilling plant in its several removals.

The sun had gone behind the mountain when he finally came out at the tramhead and signalled for the cable-car to take him down. Tryon answered the signal and started the machinery, and in a few minutes Tregarvon was landed at the Coalville level, where he found Carfax waiting for him on the porch of the office-building.

"I beat you to it," said the golden youth; and then, whimsically: "What do you know now more than you knew before you knew so little as you know now?"

Tregarvon cast himself down upon the porch-step. "I'll tell you, after a bit. Did you find out anything new?"

"Nothing very conclusive. Item number one is that there are only two horses in the High-mount stables; neither of them white, and neither with a broken toe-calk on the left hind foot."

Tregarvon smiled wearily. "More negative information; it's always negative."

"Yes; and you may put into the same basket the item that no one of the half-dozen people I asked knew of any white horse owned on the mountain. But I picked up one little pointer that belongs in the other basket—the positive. I had

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luncheon at Highmount—upon Mrs. Caswell's very pressing invitation. At table, Miss Richardia wanted to know how you came to plant your drilling-machine right in the middle of the old burying-ground."

"What's that?" said Tregarvon. "You don't mean to say that the glade is a graveyard!"

"It seems that it used to be, many years ago—for the slaves. You will remember that you remarked the sunken spots in the only bit of soft earth there is, and wondered what made them. They are graves. Do you suppose Rucker would sleep any better to-night than he did last night if he knew that? If he had known it last night, perhaps it might have accounted for some of his restlessness. But I'm drifting from the point, which is that Miss Richardia's question betrayed her: she was the young woman who drove with the man behind the white horse; otherwise she would not have known about the location of the drilling plant in the glade."

"That doesn't follow," Tregarvon objected. "Some one might have told her. But let that part of it go. Did you discover anything else?"

"Yes. After school hours I took Miss Farron, Miss Longstreet, and the French teacher out for a spin in the car. Miss Richardia said she

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couldn't go because she had another engagement. We made a rather long round to the south and came back to Highmount by a road which parallels the western brow of the mountain. Are you paying attention?"

"Breathless attention," said Tregarvon ironically. "Joy-ride stories always make me sit up. Go on."

"Over on the west-brow road we passed a place which looked as if it might be—or might some time have been—a gentleman's country house. It is walled in from the road, with a magnificently groved lawn, a box-bordered, weed-grown carriage drive, and a great, rambling, porticoed mansion needing the repair-man pretty savagely. Still sitting up and taking notice?"

"Yes."

"Just as were rolling up to pass the stone-pillared lodge-gates a horse and buggy came out, with a young woman driving. The horse was old and countrified, and he didn't take kindly to the auto. So I stopped and got out to lead him past the machine. You won't want to believe it, but the young woman driver was Miss Richardia; and the horse—well, no horseman would call it white, to be sure. It was a dapple-gray, light enough to pass for white in the moon-

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light, and with a mechanician like Rucker for the color expert."

Tregarvon came out of his listless mood with a snap.

"Let it be said, once for all, Poitiers, that I won't stand for any theory that involves Richardia Birrell in the crooked part of it," he declared firmly. "I'd trust her with anything I own; with my life, if she cared to borrow it. That dapple-gray suggestion of yours makes my back ache! It isn't worthy of you. Rucker said 'white,' and white isn't gray; not by a long shot!"

"Wait," said Carfax, evenly. "After I had led the horse safely past the car, I made sure. 'Hold on a minute, Miss Richardia,' said I, 'let me see if your horse hasn't a pebble in his shoe.' That gave me an excuse to lift his near hind foot. There wasn't any pebble, of course, but the shoe was badly worn, *and the toe-calk had a piece broken out of it!*"

Tregarvon maintained a stubborn silence for a full minute. Then he denied again, with more heat than the occasion seemed to demand.

"I don't care what evidence you bring. I'll believe nothing against Richardia; *nothing*, you understand? And, after all, what does it amount to? We agreed this morning that she might

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blamelessly take an evening drive with Hartridge. The fact that they were driving behind her father's horse cuts no especial figure that I can see."

"She might have been driving with Hartridge blamelessly; we agree on that. Or even still more blamelessly with—her father."

"Put it in words," snapped Tregarvon.

"Two or three people to whom I have spoken saw them together behind the dapple-gray, her and her father."

"I won't stand for it!" was the angry retort. "You are hinting that her father is behind these bushwhackings, and that she is a party to them. That doesn't go!"

"That was spoken very much like a lover," said Carfax slowly. And then: "You mustn't let your major weakness get away with you, Vance."

"And what do you call my 'major weakness'?" Tregarvon inquired, with a rasp to the words that made them sound like a challenge.

Carfax did not mince matters. "The inability to be off with the old love before you are on with the new," he said crisply. "Elizabeth has some rights which you ought to respect, don't you think?"

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"Go on," Tregarvon jerked out. "You haven't said it all."

"No, I haven't; but I shall say it all. You are a changed man, Vance. Either this coal-mine fight or your infatuation for this young woman, or both, are bringing out the worst there is in you. Don't you realize it?"

"I realize that this is a devil of a world!" was the gritting rejoinder. "First Richardia puts the knife into me and twists it around, and now you're doing it. I suppose it will be Elizabeth's turn, next!"

"You deserve all that is coming to you, I venture to say," suggested the mentor evenly. "You are engaged to one woman, and you come here and make love openly to another."

Tregarvon was lost now to all sense of proportion. "I shall do as I please!" he retorted hotly. "If you want to write to Elizabeth, it's your privilege. If you do, I shall tell her that you've had Richardia out in the car twice to my once!"

Carfax's mentor mood slipped away, and he laughed softly.

"Miss Richardia is a dear girl, and worthy of the best that any man can give her, Vance," he said gently. "Somebody ought to save her from

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the machinations of a William Wilberforce Hart-ridge, don't you think? You can't, you know; and sometimes I've wondered if that doesn't put it pretty squarely up to me."

Tregarvon rose and stood over his friend, and for an instant there were black passions to blaze in the wide-set gray eyes. But there was manhood enough underlying the tumult to enable him to throttle the worst of the impulses.

"I—I guess I'm just a jealous dog in the manger, Poictiers," he confessed gratingly. "I've had a hunch that it was going that way, and I've been resenting it—like the damned scoundrel I'm coming to be. But it's all over now, and—and I wish you joy. Can I say more than that?"

Carfax looked up with a quaint twinkle in his eye.

"I'm thinking you might say a good bit more, only you are too charitable to turn the whole menagerie loose. Shall we go in and get ready to eat? Uncle William will be calling us in a minute or so."

It was not until after the dinner had been eaten, and they were smoking bedtime pipes before the dining-room fire, that Tregarvon went back to the discoveries of the day.

"About the time you were going for your drive

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this afternoon, I took a walk," he said, by way of prefacing the story of the last of the discoveries. "I went over the ground we have been covering with the drill, examining every inch of it as if I had lost the set out of a diamond ring. I know now why we have been permitted to go on drilling holes in the rock without interference."

Carfax nodded. "I've had a hint of my own: I wonder if you are not going to confirm it."

"Perhaps. At any rate, I found that somebody else had been over precisely the same ground with a test-drill a good while ago. I located five holes in all, each of them filled to the top, of course, with sand and washings. One of these holes isn't twenty feet from the last one we drilled before we moved to the present location in the graveyard glade."

"Um," said Carfax, absently rolling a cigarette between his palms. "That was my guess, based upon a word that Hartridge let drop the day I drove him down here to eat with us. I suppose the corollary to that is——"

"That the accident that smashed things this morning was 'assisted,' as the others have been. So long as we went on drilling in dead ground it wasn't worth while to interfere. But now that we are trying a new wrinkle——"

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Carfax got up and returned the softened cigarette to its place in his pocket-case.

"I think we'd better sleep on that corollary of yours, Vance," he suggested mildly. "If it looks as plausible in daylight as it does now, I don't know but we had better call out the militia and give Rucker more help in the night-watching. Anyway, we'll see how it stacks up in the morning."

XI

Rosemary and Rue

THE better impulses had been all to the fore when Tregarvon had wished his friend a fair field and no favor at Highmount. But between a burst of generosity on the spur of a repentant moment and a day-by-day renouncing of a pearl of price there is apt to lie a *via dolorosa* plentifully bestrewn with stone bruises for misguided feet. On the day following the evening of plain speech Tregarvon toiled manfully with Rucker and the laborers in the repairing of the damaged machinery; but he did it without prejudice to a good many sharp-pointed reflections basing themselves upon Carfax's blunt accusation, upon the golden youth's calm interference, and upon the fact that, late in the forenoon, Carfax, apparently tired of looking on and doing nothing at the scene of the repairing activities, had strolled away through the forest in the direction of Highmount.

There was more than one disturbing string to the bow of reflection. At first, Miss Birrell had

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openly made a good-natured mock of Carfax, with his small affectations to point her gibings; but Tregarvon was now impecunious enough himself to appreciate the potency of money. Miss Richardia had told him a little about the Birrell fortunes—or the lack of them; of the vanishing of the family possessions in the aftermath of the Civil War; of the fact that her father, once the leading jurist of the Cumberland counties—Miss Richardia did not say this, but Tregarvon easily inferred it—had found himself out of touch with the later and more pushing spirit of the New South, and had withdrawn more and more until he had become almost a hermit. The Carfax millions were enough to tempt any young woman; and Carfax himself—Tregarvon admitted it without bitterness—was a man to whom most women were attracted and whom all women trusted.

But was Carfax really in love with Judge Birrell's daughter? Tregarvon boasted that he had summered and wintered the golden youth; yet there were depths in him that the Philadelphian suspected no one had ever fully plumbed. In Tregarvon's knowing of him he had always been, or appeared to be, immune to sentiment; his attitude had been that of a gentle-natured

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soul who was willing to be used, or even abused, without detriment to an impartial affection for the entire sex. Would such a man be able to make Richardia as happy as she deserved to be? In the intimacy which Tregarvon had pressed to its ultimate limits he had come to know that behind the cool, slate-blue eyes and the lips that lent themselves so readily to playful mockery there was a passionate soul which would give all and demand all; which would starve on a diet of mere affection, however kindly and indulgent. Would the Carfax millions outweigh this demand? It was an irritating question, refusing to be answered.

Tregarvon, driving bolts into the patched derrick frame, strove dejectedly to put his own huge misfortune aside as a matter definitely settled. He admitted, with pricklings of shame, the truth, or at least the half-truth, of Carfax's accusation—the charge of fickleness. In a light-hearted way he had been devoted to many women, for the moment, and the nearest woman had always been the loadstone. He excused the weakness by saying that it was common to all men—thereby touching a truth larger than he knew; excused it further by laying down the broad principle that Richardia Birrell, though

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numerically the last, was really the first woman who had ever broken through to the inner depths of him.

Just here he had a saving glimpse of the workings of the normal masculine mind, and it jogged his sense of humor. Was not the latest charmer always the pearl of great price; the one altogether lovely? Perhaps; but in this case, he told himself, it was different. The Richardias are few and far between; and he had discovered one of the precious few only to realize that he was bound in honor to relinquish her without a murmur to a Carfax, or even to a Hartridge. It was a part of the irrefrangible vanity of the male to regard the relinquishment as a voluntary virtue on his part. In all the gnawings of the worm of reflection, girdings at his hard lot, questionings as to Richardia's future happiness, gratulatory back-pattings at his own magnanimity in leaving the field to Carfax, it did not occur to him that Richardia, herself, might have had something to say to his own suit—if he had been able, as a man of honor, to press it. Like many other men, he comforted himself with the cheerful assumption that, in the absence of the abnormal obstacles, any man may win any woman, if he shall only put his mind to it; a doctrine, it

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may be said, which is still lacking proof in certain isolated instances.

Thus giving himself over to the bitterness—and the self-glorification—of the afterthought, Tregarvon wore out the day, deferring to Rucker as boss of the repairing job, and trying not to speculate too pointedly upon the doings of the absent Carfax. That the golden youth was once more a drop-in guest at the near-by school was not to be doubted; and the caviller at an unkind fate steeled himself against another disloyalty—a temptation to rail at the New Yorker for making such unseemly haste. The ill-natured thought would have likened Carfax's haste to that which prompts the heir-at-law to open and read the will while the testator is as yet merely in the throes of the death-agony—only Tregarvon would not yield to the temptation.

If the murmurer against fate could have seen beyond the half-mile of forest which intervened between the old slave burying-ground and Highmount, he would have concluded sorrowfully that Carfax's haste was well on the way to its reward. Miss Richardia's duty hours in the afternoon were short, and at three o'clock she was free to join the golden one, who, as Tregarvon's prefiguring had assumed, had been

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Mrs. Caswell's luncheon guest, and was now making himself at home on the broad veranda of the administration building. For a time the talk rambled through Boston byways and was reminiscent of Miss Richardia's sojourn as a Conservatory student and of Carfax's quickly abandoned attempt to take a postgraduate course in the School of Naval Architecture.

"You see, I didn't have the spur," was Carfax's excuse for the abandoned attempt. Then, in an apparent burst of enthusiasm: "Vance is the lucky fellow! He is obliged to work. He thinks it is pretty hard lines, but he doesn't know how jolly good it is for his soul. It is precisely what he is needing, don't you think?"

"Work? yes; but the many disappointments: are they also good for the soul?"

Carfax's smile was entirely amiable. "In due proportion, they are, I should say. Vance has been like a bit of soft steel, needing the forge fire and the tempering brine bath. I presume you know that he is engaged to be married?"

Miss Richardia's smile was of the sort that no mere man may interpret.

"I think he has told me all there was to tell. Are you acquainted with Miss Wardwell?"

"Very well acquainted, indeed. She is all

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that any man could ask—and more,” said Carfax, with more warmth than he usually permitted himself. “Last summer she was a member of a Lake Placid outing-party in which I had the good fortune also to be included. We became quite chummy. She swims, you know.”

Again Miss Birrell’s smile was a charming little mask of impenetrability.

“These athletic young women!” she sighed. “It is their day.”

“Oh, I don’t mean that Eliz—that Miss Wardwell is offensively athletic. I wouldn’t have you think that. She—she is musical and all the other things that a young woman ought to be; but she enjoys the outdoor things, too. And so do I.”

“And Mr. Tregarvon doesn’t enjoy them?”

“Just in a way,” was the qualifying rejoinder. “Vance’s misfortune has been, that, until quite recently, he has never wanted anything that he couldn’t simply reach out and take; he has never been obliged to throw himself wholeheartedly into anything. He is doing it now, though.”

“Into the Ocoee, you mean? I am afraid there is nothing but disappointment for him there.”

Carfax was silent for a moment. Then he said: “There are times, Miss Richardia, when I

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have the feeling that every one who knows what he is trying to do wishes him to be disappointed."

"Including us here at Highmount?" she laughed.

"Well, yes."

"Perhaps you would be willing to make it even more definite. Do you include me with Mr. Tregarvon's ill-wishers?"

"Sometimes I've been tempted to."

"I'm sure I don't know why you should say that."

"I have said it," Carfax returned, with the gentle doggedness which he could assume when the need was sufficiently pressing. "I shall be delighted to be assured that I am mistaken."

Now came Miss Richardia's opportunity to fall silent, and she improved it. When she spoke again the playful mockery was laid aside.

"My father was one of the sorriest of the losers in the Ocoee in the promoting period," she began soberly. "This entire mountain top was once a part of the Birrell estate; my grandfather gave the site for this school. When Mr. Parker was promoting the Ocoee, father went into the plan, heart and soul, giving a large part of the land, and putting all the money he could rake and scrape into the stock of Mr. Parker's

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company. Worse than that, he was so firmly convinced of the future success of the undertaking that he persuaded his friends to invest. You mustn't expect us to be very enthusiastic now, Mr. Carfax. It isn't in human nature to rejoice when others are preparing to reap where we have sown."

Carfax's smile was angel-compassionate.

"Poor Vance isn't reaping very successfully as yet," he pointed out. Then he added: "I hope your good father doesn't feel vindictive toward him. I think we may safely say that Vance is the innocent third party in the transaction—if there ever is such a thing."

"You don't know my father; if you did, you would hardly accuse him of vindictiveness, even in your thoughts."

"Can you say as much for yourself?" asked the accuser gently.

"Indeed, I can!"

"You wouldn't put a straw in Vance's way, if you could?"

"I wish you would listen!" she laughed. "Do I look like a—a subterranean plotter, Mr. Carfax?"

"You always look charming. But you don't want Vance to succeed."

"I am sure I don't know why you should

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think such a thing. Perhaps you don't think it. I can never tell when you are really in earnest."

"Strange that you should have noticed that. Others have said it of me, too, at times. But I am very much in earnest this afternoon. It lies in your hands to make Vance fail most conspicuously, you know."

"You are fond of riddles, and I am not. I wish you would be more explicit."

Carfax stole a glance aside at his veranda companion and it was borne in upon him that he would have to choose his words carefully. The slate-blue eyes had grown a trifle hard, and Miss Richardia's tone was no longer sympathetic.

"Vance can't mix business and sentiment very well," he ventured. "He has been spending a good bit of time here at Highmount, forgetting some things that he ought to remember. Surely you have discovered his one weakness by this time, haven't you?" he went on, gravely pleading. "Not that it isn't tremendously excusable in the present instance, you know. You—er—you are enough to turn any man's head, Miss Richardia; you are, indeed."

Her little shriek of laughter was sufficient to break any thin skim of ice which may have been congealing between them.

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"You can be quite as absurd as Mr. Vance, himself, when you try!" she mocked. Then, with the frankness which was all her own: "Are you trying to tell me that I have been playing the part of a modern Delilah, Mr. Carfax?"

"Oh, dear, no! But"—he swallowed hard once or twice, and then took the plunge—"but Vance simply couldn't help falling in love with you. Er—hardly any man could. And it's—it's smashing him to perfection. I don't say that he is admitting the—the little lapse, even to himself; he is too honorable to do that, after he has given his word to Eliz—to Miss Wardwell. But the fact remains."

Miss Richardia laughed again, but now the laugh scarcely rang true.

"You are making me out a poor, miserable sinner; though I am a most innocent one, I do assure you," she protested, not without a suggestion of sarcasm. "What is it you wish me to do?"

Carfax needed no one to tell him that he was wading in deep waters, and that another step might put him in over his head. Yet he could not retreat; he had gone too far.

"I have been trying to hammer a little common sense into Vance; perhaps I have said more than

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even a good friend has a right to say. Hitherto it hasn't done much good; but last night I had a perfectly brilliant inspiration. I wonder if you could be induced to help me carry it out?—just in the interests of a—of a square deal all around, you know.”

“Another absurdity?” she queried, half scornfully.

“Yes, just that; a—a most ridiculous absurdity. Will you—er—will you marry me, Miss Richardia?”

“Most certainly not,” she returned, with a strained little laugh. “Why should I?”

“There isn't any reason at all, of course,” he hastened to say. “But if you would make your answer not quite so—er—so positive: if you would be so generous as to—er—to seem to take it under consideration; just until Vance can get on his feet again——”

This time her laughter was wholly mirthful; an abandonment of all hamperings.

“Of all preposterous askings!” she gasped. “Are there many more like you, Mr. Carfax—in New York?”

“Plenty of them,” he assured her, not too seriously. Then: “It wouldn't be such a dreadful thing, would it? I can make love very nicely,

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you know; honestly, I can. And we shouldn't have to do anything more than to keep up appearances."

She shook her head.

"I'm not going to humor you far enough to even pretend to take you seriously," she declared.

"Not even for Vance's sake? Of course, I know you don't care for him, particularly, but I do; he has been like a brother to me, Miss Richardia; really he has. And we ought to make him realize what he is about; it's—er—it's a sort of duty, don't you think?"

"If I should tell you what I think I am afraid it might sound dreadfully unkind, Mr. Carfax. You seem to have had very little experience with women."

"Oh, but I have, you know," he burst out. "I—I'm in love, myself—with—with some one I can't possibly marry. That ought to make you feel sorry for me, and I'm sure it does. Perhaps you are in a similar situation yourself; in love with some one else, I mean. In that case——"

Miss Richardia had risen, and the mocking mood was once more firmly intrenched behind her laughing eyes.

"You have given me a most delicious half-hour, Mr. Carfax, and in the days to come, when

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I feel particularly blue, I shall always have it to look back to and remember. You are not expecting me to say any more than that, are you? I can't, you know, because I have an appointment with a pupil, and I shall have to go and keep it."

Carfax had risen with her. "I'm perfectly delighted to be your laughing-stock," he asserted gently. "You'll let me come and be it again? Thanks, awfully." And when she was gone he sat down like a man who has been through a pass perilous, and smoked three of the imported cigarettes in rapid succession.

That evening, returning from the hard day's work on the repairs, the owner of the Ocoee found Carfax awaiting him in the office headquarters at the foot of Pisgah. Uncle William's dinner, served as soon as Tregarvon had taken his bath, was not provocative of conversation; and even afterward the talk, revolving around the repairs and the mystery, was only desultory. It was not until Tregarvon was smoking his bedtime pipe that he dug the one important thing out of his mind and flung it at his companion.

"You spent the day at Highmount, I suppose?"

"Oh, dear, no; not quite so bad as that. I've been down here since half-past four or such a matter."

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"But you went to the college after you left us?"

"Yes; and Mrs. Caswell was good enough to give me something to eat at the proper time. She makes one believe all the old-time stories of Southern hospitality. Which reminds me: we are both invited there to dinner to-morrow evening."

Tregarvon refused to be turned aside.

"You didn't go to Highmount to visit with Mrs. Caswell," he suggested sourly.

"Not altogether; no."

"Did you see Richardia?"

Carfax had lighted his candle and was preparing to beat a hasty retreat, did retreat as far as the door before he turned to say: "Yes, I saw Miss Richardia. You wished me joy, last night, Vance, and I hope you are going to do it again. I've asked her to marry me, you know."

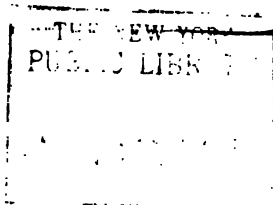
"*What!*" shouted Tregarvon, springing from his chair. And then, with a mighty effort to keep the words from choking him: "What did she say?"

Carfax smiled like a winning angel. "She—well, it seemed to strike her as being a bit sudden, as you might say, and——"

Tregarvon had dropped into a chair beside the



Carfax stopped abruptly and said no more.



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table, and was hiding his face in the crook of an elbow. Carfax stopped abruptly and said no more; and when he closed the door behind him it was done so gently that the latch made no sound.

XII

Dull Steel

RUCKER proved as good as his word in the matter of estimating the delay, two days sufficing for the work of restoration. Having made a test run in the evening after Tregarvon had gone down the mountain, the mechanic had the machinery whirling merrily to the *chug chug* of the drill by the time his two bosses came on the ground the following morning.

Among his better qualities Tregarvon was able to number a certain degree of resilience which, given time to take the full impact of a blow, could recover and rebound and make the best of the inevitable. Whatever might have come of the intimacy with Richardia Birrell—and he told himself that nothing could have come of it in any event—it was now an episode ended; and after a night of very much mingled emotions, he had risen up with the determination to play the man, for Carfax's sake if not for his own, and to let the industrial battle fill all the horizons for one Vance Tregarvon. With this determination firmly seated in the saddle, he had constrained

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himself to meet Carfax at breakfast without bitterness; to motor with him up the mountain in terms of good-fellowship; and, upon their arrival, to shout cheerfully to Rucker.

"Got her going all right again, have you, Billy? Any more puzzle people come to see you last night?"

Rucker grinned sheepishly.

"I ain't goin' to lie about it, Mr. Tregarvon. What with pushin' the job so bloomin' hard yesterday, and losin' so much sleep between whiles, I guess they might 've come and lugged me off bodily without my knowin' it."

"And you didn't find anything wrong this morning?"

"Well, no; not to say just wrong: only sort o' spookerish." Then, in a tone that the men at the drill might not hear: "There was somebody here again last night—humans 'r ghosts. I had a fit o' the jumps a while back that everlastin'ly swiped my appetite for breakfast."

"How was that?" asked Tregarvon, looking up from his inspection of the yellow car's motor; and Carfax said: "It must have been something pretty fierce, Billy, if it crippled your pneumogastric nerve."

"It was this way," Rucker explained. "Last

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night, after we got the derrick rigged again, I starts and runs the engine for a little while, just to make sure everything is in workin' order. When I shuts down, I banks the fire under the boiler so it'll keep overnight. 'Long about sunrise this mornin' I hikes over to stir her up for business, and when I yanks the fire-box door open, it's me for throwin' that fit o' the jumps. There was the yallerist, cockiest-lookin' skull you ever see, settin' on top o' the banked fire, ready to pull a grin on me when I opens the door."

"A skull?—a human skull?" exclaimed Tregarvon incredulously.

"Yep; a yaller one; all teeth and eye-holes, and with a sort of greasy black smoke comin' out o' the place where its nose ought to 'a' been."

"How did it get there?" Carfax asked the question and then answered it himself by adding: "But, of course, you don't know."

Rucker was wiping his face with a piece of cotton waste—the machinist's handkerchief. The autumn morning was cool and bracing on the mountain top, yet the perspiration stood in fine little beads on his forehead.

"No, I don't know; and if you was to search me all day, you'd never get it out o' me where it come from, 'r who put it there," he said. "I

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ain't what you'd call jumpy, but after it was all over, I didn't want no breakfast."

"What did you do with it?" Tregarvon asked.

"Me? I jammed it back into the coals with the clinker hook, and put the blower on, quick! Says I, 'All right, my bucko! You make me throw a fit, and I'll make you make steam!'"

"Heavens! You burned it?" Tregarvon was still conventional enough to be half horrified, and Carfax shuddered in sympathy.

"I certain'y did. But he got back at me, right now! In less 'n five minutes by the watch that old boiler was red-hot and blowin' off steam to beat the band. She was sweatin' black smoke at every joint; and when I chases 'round to open the fire-door—Well, you needn't believe me if you don't want to, but them grate-bars was drippin' something 'r other that looked like burnin' blood!"

There is a point beyond which the thread of sympathetic horror snaps, and the ball rebounds into the field of the ridiculous.

"That will do for you, Billy," Tregarvon laughed. "We'll allow you the skull, but you needn't embroider it for us. Somebody played a grisly joke on you—with no particular object,

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that I can see. Just the same, it has its significance. Some prowler was sneaking around here while you were asleep. Are you sure the drill is working all right?"

"You can see for yourself," said Rucker, not unboastfully. "She's jumpin' up and down to the old tune of forty to the minute, same as I promised you she'd be this mornin'."

But a closer inspection proved that Rucker's boast was loyal to the eye but a traitor to the fact. The drill was merely "jumping up and down." It was hardly cutting its own clearance; had gained in depth less than half an inch in half an hour, according to the report of Sawyer, who was at his customary post, "churning and turning" at the hole.

Rucker looked on critically for a few minutes and then laid a listening ear to the steel, bowing and recovering in unison with the stroke.

"She's hit a bone o' some kind," was his verdict; and he stopped the churning machinery and threw in the hoist by means of which the heavy cutting-bar was lifted from the hole.

An examination of the drill point amply verified the mechanician's guess that something much harder than the fine-gritted sandstone of the mountain top had been encountered in the

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bottom of the test-hole. The cutting edges of the drill burr were completely gone, broken down and gnawed smooth until the steel cutter-bar was no more than a blunt-ended ram.

Tregarvon swore painstakingly, anathematizing the demon of ill luck by bell, book, and candle, thereby further emphasizing the distance he had travelled on the road toward things elemental.

"Scrap it," he snapped, meaning the ruined drill point. "How many more have you?"

"Three."

"All right; put another one in and drive it!"

Rucker got out a fresh point, mounted and lowered it, and the churning was resumed. Three hours of steady thumping showed a gain of less than two inches in the depth of the hole, and at the end of that time the second drill burr was worn as smooth as the first.

This went on until the last of the four cutters was put in service. For a wasted day of patient churning the hole had gone down only a few inches, and Rucker was in despair.

"When this cutter goes, we're hung up for more 'n any day 'r two," he announced. "I can sharpen these points all right enough, but it'll take scads o' time with the tools we've got here on the job. You two bosses hain't made up your

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minds what t' 'ell it is we're tryin' to chew through down yonder, have you?"

Tregarvon had taken an engineering course in the university, but he was no geologist; and Carfax's equipment was even less hopeful. It was a case for a specialist; and the specialist turned up at the opportune moment in the person of Mr. Guy Wilmerding, who had ridden over from Whitlow to see how the Ocoee experiment was progressing.

His coming was hailed with acclamations by the two amateurs.

"By Jove, Wilmerding, you're just in time to save us from strait-jackets and a padded cell!" Tregarvon exclaimed. "What kind of rock do you have in this region that will make a drill point look like that?" showing the C. C. & I. superintendent one of the blunted cutters.

Wilmerding scrutinized the dulled point carefully.

"None of the native rock ought to do that," he demurred. "This is a poor piece of steel, isn't it?"

"It is one of the four cutters we have been using ever since we began. Three of them have gone that way, and the fourth is mulling in the hole now with only a few more minutes to live."

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"That's queer. I can't imagine what you've hit that would dub the points like this. Let me see the stuff you've been taking out with the sand pump."

The little heap of finely powdered cuttings was exhibited. Wilmerding examined them with the eye of an expert, rubbing some of the cuttings between his thumb and finger.

"Pebbles," he said definitely; "white quartz pebbles embedded in the sandstone—'pudding,' the miners call it. You've hit a streak of this conglomerate, and sometimes it is as hard as blue blazes. Still, I have never seen any of it that was hard enough to smash a drill like that," he added reflectively.

"You are the doctor," Carfax suggested. "What is the needed medicine?"

"There is nothing to do but to keep on hammering away at it," was the reply. "If you shift your location, the probabilities are that you would run into the same stratum again. When you go prying into Mother Earth's secrets, you have to take what she sends and be thankful it's no worse."

Tregarvon's cup of objurgation overflowed again.

"That means Rucker to go to Chattanooga

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with the cutter points, and more delay. We haven't any tool-making facilities here."

"I guess this is where I come in," said Wilmerding, with prompt generosity. "We have a well-equipped plant at Whitlow, and a blacksmith who is out of sight on drill-tempering. Load your man and the points into your motor-car and shoot them up to us. We'll try to keep you going."

Tregarvon's ill temper vanished like the dew on a summer morning. "You are certainly an enemy of a hitherto unsuspected variety!" he declared. "We've been having a good bit of trouble, first and last; some of it bearing all the earmarks of design on somebody's part. Do you know for a while I thought you might be inspiring it? That was before Carfax discovered you personally, of course."

Wilmerding's laugh was good-naturedly derisive.

"I hope you didn't think so small of Consolidated Coal as to suspect it of popping at you with a boy's whip!" he retorted. "By and by, when you find your coal and meet us in the open market, we may have to buy you or smash you. But it will be done in the good, old-fashioned commercial way."

"We shall be there when you put up the large

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come-off-the-perch bluff," Carfax thrust in gently. "But in the meantime, somebody is popping at us with the boy's whip."

"Who?—for a guess?" asked the Whitlow superintendent.

"Ah!" said Carfax, in the same gentle tone, "I have a thousand dollars somewhere about my belongings that would be delighted to blow itself against the real answer to that question."

"And you have no clue?"

Carfax smiled. "A dozen of them, more or less. But they all have a way of coming out by the roots when we begin to pull on them ever so cautiously."

"You are calling me the enemy, but that doesn't count until the real fight opens up," said Wilmerding. "If any suggestion of mine will help while you are clawing for a foothold . . . By the way, that reminds me: I made an analysis of your coals the other day. Thaxter didn't have one, didn't seem to know anything definite about the Ocoee."

"Well?" queried Tregarvon. "Do you agree with Captain Duncan?"

"If your two veins are not one and the same, they ought to be. I couldn't sift out the slightest difference between the two specimens."

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There was some further talk about the characteristics, analytical and otherwise, of the Ocoee coal, and Wilmerding stayed long enough to see the fourth and last drill point withdrawn from the hole. The cutter, like its predecessors, was a mechanical ruin; and Wilmerding again made the proffer of the Whitlow repair-plant. Tregarvon promised to send Rucker and the burrs up from Coalville in the morning, and the young superintendent climbed upon his nag and rode away.

"Tools up, men!" Tregarvon called to the drilling squad, when Wilmerding had disappeared among the trees. "We'll call it a day; and to-morrow you may all go on the track-repairing with Tryon."

Rucker was busying himself about the machinery after the laborers had gone, and as yet he had said nothing about wishing to be relieved from the night-watching. But it was clear that a man who put in full time during the day could scarcely be expected to sleep with one eye open at night. Moreover, if Rucker were to start in the morning for Whitlow with the drills, it would be necessary for him to sleep at Coalville.

"What is your programme for to-night?"

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asked Carfax, as he walked with Tregarvon to the tool-house. "I suppose you'll send Rucker down for the early start to Whitlow. You'll hardly care to leave things up here without a watchman, will you?"

"Not at the present stage of the game," was the prompt reply. "You may go down in the car with Rucker, and I'll stay here for the night. I'd like to see some of these queer happenings for myself."

"I can beat that plan," Carfax put in. "You've forgotten that we have an invitation to Highmount for dinner this evening. Mrs. Caswell gave it, and I accepted for both of us. We'll go down and dress, and come back in the car, leaving Rucker to stand watch here while we do the social act. Later, Rucker can come for us, trundling us over here, first, and himself and the drills to Coalville afterward. How will that answer?"

Tregarvon demurred upon two counts. "You mean that you'll sit up with me? You don't have to play night-watchman to this sick project of mine, Poictiers. Besides, I don't care to go to the Highmount faculty dinner. More than that, you ought to be the last man in the world to put me in for it. I've already wasted too much time in that way, and you know it."

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“In the present instance I’ve promised for you, and I guess you’ll have to go,” said Carfax quietly. “And as for my sitting up with you afterward, that’s a part of the game. I’m immensely interested in skulls and things.”

And thus, without further argument, it was decided.

XIII

The Burnt Child

THE dinner in the president's dining-room at Highmount College was anything but formal. By this time the two young men from the North were on a footing which lacked little of the household relation, Mrs. Caswell having said hospitably, more than once, that their plates were always laid at the faculty table.

Quite naturally, the Ocoee experiment came in for a share of the table-talk, and in this field Tregarvon let Carfax do most of the ploughing. For one reason, Miss Richardia had changed her place and was sitting on the other side of the golden one; and for another, his own companion was the French teacher, who persisted in talking, and making him talk, of things transatlantic and Parisian.

Later, however, he was tempted—and fell. The night was too cool for the veranda, and the after-dinner dispersal was to the music-room. Richardia played, and for a time Tregarvon sat beside Miss Farron and said “Yes” and “No,” as the occasion demanded, coming always after-

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ward to a rapt and regretful contemplation of the pearl of great price on the piano-bench.

Being an artist to her finger-tips, Miss Birrell at the piano became a breaker of hearts by just so much more as the mask of self-consciousness fell away, leaving the true art soul free to express itself in the musician's ecstasy of detachment. In such moments Tregarvon saw her as the embodied spirit of all that was most desirable in the world of women; gazed spellbound, sinned, repented, and sinned again; calling himself hard names in one breath, and rhapsodizing deliriously over the supernal charm of her in the next.

Again and again he told himself in caustic self-derision that his infatuation was merely the result of propinquity—the nearness of Richardia coupled with the remoteness of Elizabeth. But as often as he pleaded this excuse, the merciless inner and final court of appeals assured him that the evasion was but the adding of self-deception to unfaithfulness, and insisted upon a restatement of the humiliating facts: that he had promised to marry a woman whom he did not love, when he knew he did not love her; and that he was now adding to this baseness by admitting his love for another.

This restatement of the case was dinning it-

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self into his ears for the hundredth time while he was saying "Yes" and "No" to the pretty assistant in mathematics, and praying in his more lucid intervals that Rucker might come early with the motor-car and so forestall any chance of deeper mirings. But Rucker was apparently in no hurry. Miss Richardia played until she was tired; Madame Fortier and Miss Farron excused themselves and went to their duties in the dormitories; Hartridge and Miss Longstreet went to brave the chill of the evening in a pacing constitutional on the veranda; and the group in the music-room was cut down to the Caswells, their guests, and Miss Birrell.

At this conjuncture Tregarvon saw that Carfax was about to add insult to injury by leaving him alone with Richardia. The president was talking about some improvements he wished to make in the school gymnasium: would Mr. Carfax be good enough to look the plans over and give a country schoolmaster the benefit of his advice? Tregarvon turned to the nearest window to watch for the headlamps of the expected auto. They were not yet in sight; and when the silence behind him gave token that Carfax and the Caswells had gone, he knew that he had been basely deserted.

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Miss Richardia was still at the piano, letting her fingers run in delicate little harmonies up and down the keyboard. Tregarvon meant to keep his distance, but she drew him so irresistibly that he was beside her before he realized that he was once more breaking all the good resolutions.

"Don't go just yet," he pleaded, when she looked around, saw that the others were gone, and made as if she would rise. Then he added: "It isn't my fault this time: I didn't wish to come, but Poitiers had accepted for me. You mustn't punish me when I don't deserve it."

She looked up at him with the air of detachment which he had always found more trying than her sharpest accusations.

"Why should I punish you at all? Hasn't your conscience been doing that much for you?"

"Don't!" he begged again. "Now that it is all over, I am going to tell you that I have been a liar and a hypocrite."

She stopped him with a quick little gesture of dismay.

"Please don't spoil it all now—just because we happen to be alone together for a minute or two. When are you going home to marry Miss Wardwell?"

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"You are perfectly merciless," he complained.
"Must we talk about Elizabeth?"

"Ask your conscience," she retorted.

"My conscience is busy and doesn't want to be disturbed. One would think you had been born and bred in New England!"

"I wasn't; I was born on this mountain."

He sat down in the nearest chair and tried to remember that he was talking to the woman who was as good as promised to Poitiers Carfax.

"I know," he offered; "in a rambling old house with a groved lawn It has a box-bordered carriage drive, and a big, pillared veranda fronting the west."

"Yes; when have you ever seen Westwood House?"

"Perhaps I haven't seen it; perhaps I am only imagining how it ought to look. But the name 'Westwood' is familiar enough. It is written all over the Ocoee maps."

Her smile, on any other lips, would have had more than a hint of bitterness in it.

"I suppose we ought to be proud of the distinction. The printing of the home name on the maps was the only return my father ever had for what he did for Mr. Parker. But, of course, you know all about that."

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"Not so much as I'd like to know. I have understood that your father was a heavy investor in the original Ocoee company, and that Parker contrived to give him the hot end of things in the reorganization."

"It is all true."

"It makes me feel as if I had been caught stealing sheep," he volunteered. "Ethically, I suppose the Ocoee doesn't belong to me at all, though I hope it is clear to everybody that neither I nor my father had any part in the crookedness. So far as that goes, my father never knew anything about the early history of the mine; and neither did I before I came down here. How does your father feel about it?"

It did not strike him at the moment as being particularly significant that she did not answer the question categorically.

"Those things are all past and gone," she said half-absently. And then: "I wish you might meet my father; you and Mr. Carfax."

The mention of Carfax's name was as salt to a fresh wound.

"You've changed your mind about Poictiers, haven't you?" he said, and he tried to make the saying of it entirely judicial. "You made fun of him at first, you know."

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"Not of him, but of some of the things that he said and did," she corrected quickly. "And that was only because I didn't know him; because I was so stupid as not to recognize the real man under the transparent little mask of affectation that he delights in holding up between himself and all the rest of the world."

Tregarvon made a loud call upon his magnanimity, and concurred heartily.

"He is the finest there is, Richardia. I—I hope he will be able to make you as happy as you deserve to be."

For the moment he was puzzled. Sheer maiden modesty might have accounted for the blush, but why should the slate-blue eyes grow suspiciously bright, as with tears?

"Then he has told you?" She had turned away from him and there was a little catch in her voice.

"Yes. It broke my heart, Richardia—which shows you how far I had gone on the road to depravity. Poitiers said to me once that I was playing the dog in the manger, and so I was. There was no excuse, of course; there never is an excuse for dishonor. But you were heart and soul and conscience to me, and I seemed to need you so much more than anybody else ever could.

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I can say all this without blame now, can't I? You are going to marry Poitiers, and I am going to marry Elizabeth."

She had turned farther away, as if to conceal emotions too profound to be shared. At first he thought she was crying, and wondered why. Then it was borne in upon him that she was laughing, and he became instantly and hotly resentful.

"If you are laughing at me and my little lunacy, it is all right," he exploded. "But if it's at Poitiers——"

When she let him see her face again it was perfectly straight, but there were twin imps of mockery dancing in the eyes of desire.

"Between you and Mr. Carfax it is hard for a poor country mouse to find breathing space," she asserted. "Am I to understand that you are trying to congratulate me?"

Tregarvon frowned heavily. "No; Poitiers is the one to be congratulated—if you were not laughing at him."

"I wasn't," she denied promptly. "He is much too splendid to be laughed at. Don't criticise the word; it is the only one that fits him."

"Then you were laughing at me?"

"No."

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"At what I said, then? that is just as cruel."

"Why will you insist upon being so quarrelsome? I was laughing because I couldn't help it. Let us talk about something else; about your mine. Have you been having any more of the mysterious trouble?"

"Yes; it is one thing after another. You heard what Poictiers was telling at the table this evening. He made it sound like hard luck, but it isn't luck; it's design. Some one is making the trouble for us."

"Who would do such a thing as that?"

"For a long time we were totally in the dark. But now we know the man."

Miss Richardia had the translucent complexion that harmonizes perfectly with cloudy blue eyes and masses of light-brown hair brightened by touches of warmer tints; hence there was no telltale pink to vanish at the command of sudden emotion. Yet Tregarvon saw she was startled, and that the exciting cause was quickspring anxiety.

"You have seen him?" she asked.

"Rucker, the machinist, has." Tregarvon was always making good resolutions about not talking too much, and always breaking them. It had been no part of his intention to refer to the

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incriminating incident in which Richardia herself figured as one of the two actors, but the inexpedient thing was said and he could only hope that Richardia would not ask for more.

She was looking away again when she said: "Now that you know, I suppose you will defend your rights?"

"Take legal steps, you mean? I don't wish to do that, if it can be avoided."

"No; anything but that!" she pleaded in low tones. "You must remember the provocation."

"I didn't give the provocation."

"No; but you are associated, in a way, with those who did. You have inherited a legacy of ill will."

"I might be able to understand that, if the man who is making the trouble were one of the ignorant natives. But he is not."

"No," she agreed half-absently; "he is not."

"Then you know who it is?" said Tregarvon, again permitting himself to say one of the things which might better have been left unsaid.

She nodded slowly. "I—I am afraid I do. And I am going to plead for him, if you will let me. There are mitigating circumstances—prejudices against all Northerners as Northerners. You can't understand that, because the North

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didn't suffer as the South did in the war between the States—at least, not in the same way. And the South has suffered bitterly since the war; from such men as Mr. Parker. There was a disposition on our part to let bygones be bygones, after the great struggle; but a few unprincipled promoters have done much to keep the old sectional animosities alive."

Tregarvon was regarding her thoughtfully.

"You are wise beyond your years and your sex," he said soberly. "What do you think I ought to do to this anachronistic gentleman who is visiting the sins of other people upon my poor head?"

"I can only beg of you to be broad-minded and charitable and slow to anger for the sake of all concerned—for my sake, if you must put it upon narrower ground."

At this appeal, the earnestness of which could not be questioned, Tregarvon was frankly puzzled. A little earlier in the adventure he would not have been surprised to find Richardia Birrell pleading for Hartridge; but now, with Carfax apparently elbowing the professor aside in the sentimental field, there seemed to be less reason for the plea, unless pure friendship might account for it.

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"I shall put it wholly upon 'narrower ground,' as you call it," he maintained. "If you tell me that you care enough for the man you are pleading for to ask me to spare him for your sake——"

"Care enough?" she exclaimed, wide-eyed. "I should be singularly inhuman if I didn't care!"

As in a flash of revealing lightning Tregarvon saw and thought he understood. It was not Hartridge for whom she was interceding; the professor of mathematics was not the man who had driven with her to the glade on the night of strange happenings—who had stood with her in the shadow of the drill derrick, shaking his fist at the inanimate symbol of the renewed Ocoee activities. The moving spirit in all the enmities and antagonisms was her father!

For a moment the thing seemed unbelievable. That a man who had formerly been a judge and a champion of the law should become a feudist, carrying his vindictiveness over from those who had defrauded him to the defrauders' innocent successor, appeared blankly incredible. Yet Tregarvon remembered that the South still held many archaic well-springs of thought and action—he had to fight anachronisms daily in his laborers—and that the older generation was not to be

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judged by the standards of the new. Judge Birrell had felt the heel of the invader, not only in the great conflict between the States, but afterward, when the invader came as a friend and robbed him in the name of business.

Tregarvon had little time in which to determine what he ought to say; time for nothing but a sudden and loyal resolve not to fail Richardia in her moment of need. Voices in the hall warned him that Carfax and the Caswells were returning, and at the same moment he heard the honk of the motor announcing Rucker's approach. He was upon his feet when he said: "You have told me something that I didn't know—didn't suspect. I can scarcely believe it yet. But you need have no fears for anything that I shall do. You mustn't worry for a single moment. It will all come out right in the end."

He had his reward in a quick little grasp of the hand, in eyes filling this time with real tears, and in a low-toned outpouring of gratitude.

"I knew you would say that," she avouched. "It is what you have taught me to expect of you. I am doing all I can to—to bring about a better understanding, and if you will only be patient and wait a little while——"

Carfax and the two Caswells were entering the

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music-room, and Tregarvon turned quickly and made a pretense of rearranging the music on the piano desk. The small diversion gave him a chance for another whispered word of assurance. "I've been advertising myself to you as all kinds of a graceless wretch, but now I'll show you that I can rise to the occasion. Don't be afraid: there will be no scandal—no tragedy, so far as you and yours are concerned."

She caught instantly at the qualification. "Then there are others?" she queried.

"One other, at least. And after what you have just told me I am quite sure he is acting entirely upon his own responsibility. I'll tell you more about him some other time."

Carfax was already taking leave, and Tregarvon joined him. The host and hostess went no farther than the door with the departing guests, and Miss Richardia remained in the music-room. At the veranda steps there was a little delay while Rucker was doing something to the motor. In the waiting interval Tregarvon found himself answering a question of Hartridge's about the progress of the test-drilling, the professor having outstayed his art-teacher companion in their retreat to the open air.

"No," said Tregarvon, "we are not getting

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along as well as we might. There seems to be a curious obstructive fatality dogging us. If you were in the chair of psychology instead of that of mathematics, we might give you a very handsome little problem to work on, Mr. Hart-ridge. I wonder if you would attack it?"

The mild-eyed professor's smile was blandly incommunicative.

"You mustn't expect any sympathy from me," he returned genially. "The proverb tells us specifically that the burnt child dreads the fire; but it doesn't add the corollary, which is equally true, and as old as human nature—namely, that the burnt child experiences an unholy joy when his playmate attempts to pick up the same hot nail."

"Ah?" said Tregarvon. And then: "I had forgotten, if, indeed, I ever knew. You were one of the original stockholders in the Ocoee?"

"To the extent of my entire savings account; which was a mere drop in the promoter's bucket, after all. Nevertheless, I can still be magnanimous enough to wish you all success." Then, abruptly: "You have a delightful night for your drive to Coalville. I could almost envy you."

Tregarvon did not undeceive him about the destination of the drive; for good and sufficient

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reasons it did not seem necessary to tell Hart-ridge that the drilling plant would have two watchers that night, instead of none. With a word of leave-taking he joined Carfax in the tonneau seat, and the yellow car rolled away down the drive, with Rucker at the wheel.

It was less than an eighth of a mile from the college gates to the point where the glade road turned to the left out of the downward pike, and when Rucker would have taken the left-hand road, Tregarvon made him stop the car.

"We can walk in from here, Billy," he explained, and the two volunteer watchers got out to do it while the car, lightened of two-thirds of its load, coasted noiselessly on down the steep mountain road and out of sight around the first curve.

On the short walk over to the drilling plant Tregarvon spoke but once, and that was to say: "Your guess about Hartridge was right, Poictiers. He was one of the native crowd which was pinched out in the first reorganization of the Ocoee."

"Did Richardia tell you that?"

"No; he told me himself, just as we were leaving. And he is still sore about it, though he tried to turn it off as a joke."

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"Um," said Carfax reflectively. "If he is the man who is putting a finger into your pie, we'll be likely to see him within the next half-hour or so, don't you think? He supposes we are on the road to Coalville, and he knows that Rucker is driving. Which presumably leaves the plant unguarded. What will you do if we should happen to catch him red-handed?"

"That remains to be seen," said Tregarvon moodily. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." And for the remainder of the walk he was silent; it being no part of his intention to tell Carfax that Richardia's father was the one who, arguing from conclusions which seemed to be well-founded in inference, if not in fact, was most likely to be caught red-handed.

XIV

The Logic of Fact

UPON their arrival at the drilling plant the two young men who had been Mrs. Caswell's dinner-guests made a dressing-room of the small tool shanty and changed quickly to their working clothes; after which they sat upon the door-step to smoke in sober silence, each busy with his own thoughts.

For Tregarvon the talk with Richardia had wrenched the point of view violently aside, adding new perplexities and fresh discouragement. Richardia's apparent fear that her father was responsible for the obstacles which had been thrown in the way of the test-drilling was a thing to be believed only because Richardia's plea could apparently have no other meaning. Being alien to the South and a townlander, the Philadelphian found it difficult to understand the attitude of a man who would make a personal matter of an ancient business defeat, carrying his animosity over from the real offender to an innocent third party. But seemingly—since Richardia's word was not to be doubted—the fact remained.

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Tregarvon saw at once that the Ocoee experiment was made vastly less hopeful by the discovery to which Richardia had led him. Though he had never met Judge Birrell, Coalville gossip had done the fiery old recluse ample justice. For the loungers at Tait's store the judge figured as a venerable survival of the *ancien régime*; of the good old times when the great landed proprietors ruled their small kingdoms with an iron rod; and were coincidently, and in the meliorating sense of the word, kindly and generous tyrants to all and sundry. Tregarvon had heard enough to assure him that the sentiment of the entire countryside would be with Judge Birrell in any cause he might see fit to champion; but apart from this, the one insurmountable bar to any defensive reprisals on his own part lay in Richardia's appeal. Tregarvon felt that the appeal, and his yielding thereto, had effectually tied his hands, and he was still sufficiently infatuated to be glad. Carfax might marry Richardia and endow her with his millions; but her greatest debt would still be to the man who had refused to defend himself at her father's expense.

Back of the dismaying discovery which had changed the point of view, there was other food for reflection. When he had ventured to hope

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that Carfax might make her happy, why had Richardia laughed? The query led to the recognition of another impression, given often when he was with her, and as often slurred over and dismissed when it came to be analyzed. Not the least of her charms for him was her crystal-clear straightforwardness. Nevertheless, there had been times when he had been made to feel that behind the frankness there were reservations; times when he had been given fleeting glimpses of an inner Richardia hiding behind the slate-blue eyes and whimsically mocking him.

"I hope the good Mrs. Caswell's dinner is not disagreeing with you," Carfax broke in, in the midst of the analyzing abstraction; and Tregarvon came back to things present with a jerk.

"Not at all," he denied. "I was just thinking."

"Better not think too much after a hearty meal. It's bad for the digestion," was the gentle rejoinder.

Tregarvon grunted. "You didn't leave out anything but the name. I can't help thinking of her, Poictiers. It's no disloyalty to you, or to Elizabeth. You had no business to leave me alone with her when Doctor Caswell asked you to go and look over the gymnasium things."

Carfax chuckled softly.

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"You are a wild ass of the plains, Vance. It is borne in upon me that I shall have to marry her out of hand to bring you to your senses."

"The quicker the better," said Tregarvon gloomily. "There is no use in prolonging the agony."

"Then you'll admit that it is an agony?"

"I can't joke about it, Poictiers. I have made the one crowning blunder that spoils a man's life. Don't look at me that way. I'm not going to be either a fool or a scoundrel. I shall marry Elizabeth and try to make her as happy as I can; but it will be without prejudice to the fact that I didn't know what love was when I promised her. I can imagine just how brutal that sounds to you, but it's the truth."

"The truth is always rather brutal, isn't it?" Then the golden youth permitted himself a word that he rarely used. "I'm damned sorry for Elizabeth."

"As I told you once before, you needn't be," Tregarvon snapped back. "There is absolutely no question of sentiment between us, and there has never been. You'd appreciate that if you should read her letters to me; letters in answer to my babblings about Richardia. If Elizabeth had a spark of sentiment in her she would have

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sent me packing long ago. I've told her pretty nearly everything there was to tell."

"I suppose you have. That is one of your amiable weaknesses—to tell some woman, any woman who happens to be within reach, a lot of things that no woman ought to be told. You deserve all that is coming to you, Vance."

"I suppose I do," Tregarvon admitted; and beyond this the silence came to its own again. After a time, Carfax suggested quizzically that the ghosts might be too bashful to come out while there were two able-bodied watchers in sight; and at that they went inside to find seats on a coil of rope opposite the open door. Before long, the interior darkness began to make Tregarvon sleepy and he had quite lost himself when a touch of Carfax's hand aroused him.

"Look steadily at the big oak just beyond the engine—the one where we found the tripod marks," was the whispered injunction. "Do you see anything?"

Tregarvon rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and stared hard at the oak. "Nothing doing," he said.

"Yes, there is," Carfax asserted. "There is a man behind that tree. I saw him just before I shook you awake."

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"Piffle!" said Tregarvon. "That oak isn't big enough to hide a man."

"Just the same, he is there!" retorted Carfax, still in a whisper. Then: "I suppose it didn't occur to you that we might need something more persuasive than our bare hands up here to-night, did it?"

"No; and we shan't." Tregarvon was suddenly reminded of his promise to Richardia that there should be no tragedies. "What we can't handle peaceably, we'll let go."

"All right; you're the doctor," said the golden youth mildly. "Nevertheless, if I had a gun I'd go out and capture that fellow who is hiding behind the tree."

"Still nervous, are you?" Tregarvon put in. "You are dreaming, Poictiers. There isn't any one there."

"All right, again," was the serene reply. "Have it that way, if you like. Only don't forget to keep your eye on the tree."

That was the beginning of a patient watch which was maintained for a full quarter of an hour. The night was perfectly still; there was not wind enough to rustle the browning leaves of the oaks or to whisper in the pines. Afar off, the little screech-owl whose haunts had been

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invaded by the drilling plant lifted up his voice in shrill chatterings, but there were no other sounds to break the silence. Once during the watchful vigil Tregarvon thought he saw something stirring among the trees on the farther side of the glade, and his fingers closed upon Carfax's arm. But when he looked again the shadows were undisturbed.

"This is tremendously exciting," Carfax commented finally, in gentle irony. "If I weren't morally certain that I saw a man dodge behind that tree a little while ago, I'd fall asleep."

"Do it anyway," Tregarvon suggested. "I'll stand watch, and call you when your turn comes. Take Rucker's cot."

"Do you really mean it?"

"Sure I do. Turn in and take your forty winks. If anything seems likely to happen, I'll let you know."

"Then I believe I'll take you at your word. I haven't been so sleepy since the year before Noah built the ark of gopherwood. If Mrs. Caswell wasn't as far above suspicion as the angels of light, I might suspect her of having put something into the black coffee."

Five minutes later Tregarvon was sitting alone on the rope coil, rubbing his eyes and

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wishing that he might decently follow Carfax's example. The very act of staring at the moonlit glade hypnotized him, the more since there was nothing unusual to be seen. With the view through the open door becoming hazy and startlingly distinct by turns, he struggled manfully against the rising tide of somnolence, nodding, and recovering himself with a jerk when he realized that the tide was submerging him. But out of one of the nodding moments he came with a violent start that instantly banished all thoughts of sleep. The little screech-owl had ceased complaining, and the arousing sound had been the distinct clink of metal upon stone.

When he looked he saw that the time for action had come. Standing fairly in the midst of the small clearing, the drill derrick was struck out boldly in the white moonlight, with every outline and detail sharply distinguishable. In the square of cleaned rock surface marked off by the four legs of the derrick frame Tregarvon saw a man crouching. The clinking noise was repeated and the watcher at the door faced about and felt his way in the inner darkness to the bed in the corner of the tool-room.

"Wake up, Poitiers!" he called in low tones; "the play has begun!"

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Carfax sat up promptly and asked but a moment for the finding of himself. "I'm all here," he said. "What's doing?"

For answer Tregarvon led him to the door and pointed to the square of bared bed-rock under the derrick frame. There was a man there, without doubt, but now he was standing up and was apparently examining something which lay in the palm of his hand. The sudden rush of the two from the tool shanty was quite evidently a surprise for the intruder, but he made no attempt to escape. So far from it, he lifted his soft hat politely and said: "Good evening again, gentlemen. You took me completely by surprise—as perhaps you meant to. I was quite sure that you were both safely in bed in Coalville by this time."

"No," said Carfax very gently. "We have not been in Coalville at all: we have been here, waiting, quite patiently for—you, Mr. Hartridge."

"That was kind," said Hartridge affably. "And, now that your patient waiting has been duly rewarded?—"

"Now that we have caught you we shall ask you to solve that little problem in psychology for us," put in Tregarvon. "We'd like to know

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what it is that you have just been dropping into that drill-hole."

"And if I assure you that I have been putting nothing into your drill-hole, what then, Mr. Tregarvon?"

"In that case I shall ask Carfax to see that you don't run away while I ascertain for myself," was the firm rejoinder; and a careful dip of the long cleaning spoon into the test-hole brought up a half-dozen small metallic objects; cubes cut from a bar of tool-steel they appeared to be.

Tregarvon handled the cubes and passed them on to Carfax.

"We owe you something for a day lost and four drill points all but ruined, Mr. Hartridge," he said rather grimly, adding: "But we'll credit your account with this present failure to make us do it all over again to-morrow. Would you mind telling us in so many words what your object has been—or still is, perhaps?"

The professor's smile was imperturbably bland.

"I am sure you wouldn't be so harsh as to put me on the witness-stand in my own defense," he said, still amiable. "Especially since you have no evidence of anything worse than a neighborly call at, perhaps, a somewhat unseasonable hour."

At this Carfax came quite close and he forgot

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to lisp when he said: "Mr. Hartridge, may I ask you to remove your overcoat for a moment? The night is a bit chilly, I know, but——"

The tone of the request was gentle enough but there was a quality in it that made the suggestion a demand. The professor slipped out of the coat, quaintly quoting Scripture for the ready compliance. "'If any man . . . take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak, also.' Anything to oblige a friend, Mr. Carfax."

Carfax took the surrendered coat and, feeling in the right-hand pocket, drew out one of the little steel cubes; quite evidently the one which Hartridge had had in his hand at the moment of surprises.

"Thank you; that is all," said the searcher, returning the coat, or rather holding it thoughtfully while Hartridge put it on. And then: "You will hardly deny that we have sufficient evidence now, I take it?"

The professor of mathematics spread his hands as one who has done his best and is only regretful that he can do no more.

"Let us assume that the case has gone to the jury: what is the verdict, gentlemen?"

"You are asking what we mean to do?" Tregarvon demanded.

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"That is it, precisely. What can you do?—drag me before the nearest justice of the peace on a charge of malicious mischief? You would scarcely wish to disturb the tranquillity of an old and honored institution of learning like Highmount College by such a proceeding as that, would you?"

Tregarvon could not help smiling at the audacity of the man, and the New Yorker laughed outright.

"You have a most excellent quality of nerve, Mr. Hartridge," was Carfax's tribute to the audacity. "As you suggest, our field is rather limited. You are perfectly well aware of the fact that Highmount and its hospitality stand as the only barrier between us and social starvation. Let us try to discover a *modus vivendi*. The verdict is: 'Guilty, with a recommendation to mercy.' We are willing to give any man's sense of humor a chance to redeem itself. You quoted Scripture at me a moment ago, let me return the compliment: 'Go in peace, and sin no more.'"

The professor drew himself up, smiling genially and lifting his hat.

"I thank you, gentlemen; you are very considerate," he returned in gentle irony. After

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which he walked away, pausing at the edge of the glade to lift his hat again.

Carfax drew a long breath when the tall, black-coated figure was lost under the tree shadows. Then he turned upon his companion:

"I'm not going to say, 'I told you so,' Vance, because I think you came around to my point of view some little time ago. What is the motive—Hartridge's motive? Is it merely impish humor? Or does it go deeper than that?"

Tregarvon was busily engaged in putting two and two together to make the inevitable four. The schoolmaster was in love with Richardia Birrell; the Philadelphian's first visit to Highmount had made this perfectly plain: could it be possible that Hartridge was acting as Judge Birrell's agent in the obstacle-raising? And, if so, did Richardia know it?

"Stay here a few minutes, Poitiers," he directed. "I'm going to follow him and see if he goes straight back to Highmount."

"Joy go with you," said Carfax; and when he was left alone he went to sit on the step of the tool-house to smoke while he waited.

XV

Mammy Ann's Grave

CARFAX was smoking his third cigarette when Tregarvon returned from spying upon the retreating professor and sat down in sober silence upon the door-step.

The smoker waited patiently for some little time before he said suggestively: "I hope you didn't have your walk for nothing."

"I saw all I needed to see."

"Hartridge went to the college?"

"I suppose so; he was headed that way when I turned back."

Carfax waited again, and when nothing further was forthcoming: "It's a remarkably beautiful night, isn't it? Did you ever see a handsomer moon?"

"Don't make me talk!" was the irritable rejoinder. "You'll be sorry for it if you do."

"Try me and see."

"Well, then—if you will have it: there was a witness to our little comedy out there under the derrick."

"Some one who came with Hartridge?"

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"I guess so. Some one who went back with him, at any rate."

"Who was it?"

"I hate to tell you, Poictiers. It was—it was the woman you are going to marry; Richardia Birrell."

Carfax laughed softly.

"I don't see why you need be so desperately gloomy because it happened to be Richardia. As I remarked a moment ago, the night is jewel fine, and I don't wonder that she found it hard to stay indoors. And as to my rights in the matter, I am far from denying her the privilege of walking abroad with so old a friend as Mr. William W. Hartridge."

"You are trying to make a jest of it, as you do of everything," was the crabbed retort. "Don't you see what it means?"

"I must confess that I don't see anything especially catastrophic about it."

"You don't? Why, good heavens, man! it means that Richardia knows what Hartridge has been doing. I won't admit yet that she is a party to it; but she *knows*!"

"*Place aux dames*," said Carfax cheerfully. "We'll give her the benefit of the doubt; it's our clear duty—or, at least, it is mine."

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"No, I'll be hanged if we do!" Tregarvon growled. "There isn't even a doubt where she is concerned!"

Carfax threw the half-burnt cigarette away and lighted another.

"Your tone is that of the still deeply infatuated lover. Must we again come back to that phase of it?" he inquired, in the tone of the long-suffering but still amiable bystander.

The man beside him took plenty of time to consider. But when he opened the flood-gates there was a torrent of self-accusings to pour out.

"I'm a beast, a cad, the cheapest of cheap skates, Poitiers!—anything you like to call me. It hasn't touched Richardia, but it has gone all sorts of despicable distances with me. When you told me the other night that you had proposed to her, I could have murdered you. And just now, when I saw her walking arm in arm with Hartridge, I wanted to run amuck and destroy him. I'm not trying to excuse myself when I say that I didn't go down without a struggle. I did make some kind of a fight at first: I even went so far as to tell Richardia all about Elizabeth. But it didn't do any good."

Carfax's smile was out of the depths of wis-

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dom, and it was not visible above the horizon for the penitent.

"That was great," he said, referring to the forlorn-hope confession of the engagement. "I don't believe I could have done that."

"Oh, there is nothing coming to me on that score," Tregarvon objected, carrying self-abnegation to the limit. "I couldn't help telling her; not because it was the honest thing to do, but because I should have burst into inconsequent little shards long ago if I hadn't told her everything I knew."

"And she has been encouraging this little idiosyncrasy of yours?" Carfax asked tentatively.

"Not on your life! She has been doing everything that an angel out of heaven could do to smash me back into my place; to show me how many different kinds of an idiot I was making of myself. No longer ago than this evening, when you went off with the Caswells and left me in the lurch, the first thing she did was to ask me when I was going home to marry Elizabeth."

For the first time in Tregarvon's knowing of him, Carfax appeared to be losing his temper.

"A beast, a cad, and the cheapest of cheap skates," he repeated carefully. "They are your own words, and they will all apply to you if you

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don't tell Elizabeth all and more than you have just told me."

"There is the millstone grind of it!" groaned the sinner. "If I should tell her how far it has gone with me, it would be tantamount to asking her to make me a present of myself, with the Uncle Byrd millions thrown in for a *lagniappe*. I suppose I've got it to do, now, but I'd cheerfully accept the alternative of walking into old Brother Daniel's den of lions."

"Y-e-s, I should think you would," was the drawling comment. "Any man who would make a football of the happiness of such a woman as Elizabeth Wardwell——"

"Hold on," Tregarvon cut in, sobering suddenly. "Get up and walk on me, if that is what you think is coming to me; but don't mangle me with a cold iron. I'm out of it all around. If Richardia doesn't marry you, she'll marry Hartridge; and when I tell Elizabeth, as I've got to, that will be the end of things with her. You mustn't hit a man when he is down. It's wicked."

"Everything goes—between friends," said Carfax, who could never take the trouble to put his displeasure into any permanent form. "It does look as if you were up against it, before and

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behind. Far be it from me to break the bruised reed, or to quench the smoking flax."

"Oh, confound you for a Job's comforter!" rasped Tregarvon, breaking out afresh. "I've got to believe in people—I'm built that way; and if I could think for a moment that Richardia is Hartridge's accomplice in this contemptible trickery of his——"

"Well, if you could?" prompted the comforter, after the pause had grown overlong."

"If I could, I'd lose faith in my own good intentions," finished Tregarvon, whose stock of comparisons was running low. "Still," he went on, talking now because he was started and could not stop, "still it's against me, Poitiers; the whole world is against me. In that same talk in the music-room this evening—while you were away with the Caswells—Richardia was anxious about these happenings of ours; afraid somebody would get hurt; in fact, she made me promise not to hurt anybody."

"Meaning Professor William Wilberforce Hartridge, M. A., Vanderbilt?"

"No; er—that is, I don't think she meant him." Tregarvon was not yet ready to tell Carfax that he was well assured that her fear was for her father; though she had not bound him to

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secrecy, he felt that what she had said had been spoken in confidence.

Carfax got up from his cramped sitting on the door-step, stretched, yawned, and looked at his watch, holding the dial up to the moonlight.

"Ten minutes past eleven," he announced. "Do we turn in and sleep a few lines? Or is it to be a continuous performance—like those that the vaudeville people advertise?"

"Go inside and finish your nap," Tregarvon directed, filling and lighting his pipe. "I'm not sleepy now; don't know as I ever shall be again."

"You think the curtain has been rung down for to-night?"

"You'd say so, wouldn't you? The star has gone home and has probably gone to bed. If he should get up and walk in his sleep, I'll call you."

Carfax hung upon the threshold. "Better call me, anyhow, after I've had another forty winks or so, so you can take your turn. People have to sleep, you know—even after a funeral."

"You go to bed!" was the gruff command; and Tregarvon began a monotonous sentry beat up and down before the tool-house. But a minute later he thrust his face in at the little square window to say: "Asleep yet?"

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"My Heavens, no!" returned a querulous voice in the inner darkness. "Do you take me for an auto-hypnotist?"

"I have just developed a notion, and it is beginning to gnaw me," explained the sentinel on duty. "What if the man who was on his knees at the test-hole when I went to waken you wasn't Hartridge, after all?"

"Oh, good Lord!" complained the voice. "Are you trying to drag somebody else into it?—when the character cast is already full and running over, and all the supernumeraries have been tagged and labelled? Turn the notion out of doors; tread on it; break its back with a stick! We caught Hartridge with the goods on him, didn't we?"

"Yes; but——"

"But what?"

"Nothing much: only now that I come to think of it, I seem to remember that the man I saw dropping things into the hole wasn't wearing Hartridge's kind of a hat."

"Oh, granny! Go on and do your little sentry go. Your head is muddled and you want to pass the muddle on to me. I'm asleep, I tell you—sound asleep! I don't hear a word you are saying."

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Tregarvon gave it up; not the lately developed notion, which grew rather more insistent the longer he thought about it, but the attempt to interest Carfax. During the lonely two-hour watch which followed he had time to go reflectively over the events of the night, to set them in orderly array, and to let the unconsidered minor happenings fit into their places and weigh as they would.

The process straightened out a few of the tangles, or it seemed to. Richardia's concern, expressed by her fear that violence might grow out of the antagonisms, was undoubtedly for her father. Also, it was plain that up to the moment of confidences she had not suspected Hartridge of being her father's agent; it being a fair presumption that she would have spoken of the professor if she had. Having got that far, Tregarvon began to ask himself if Hartridge was the only one actively involved. In at least two instances the schoolmaster might fairly be held exempt. It was still incredible that the man who had come to the Coalville headquarters as a guest had deliberately plotted to have his host's motor-car wrecked on its return from Highmount. By the same token, it was difficult to imagine the professor of mathematics in the rôle of the sardonic

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practical joker who had shocked Rucker with a resin-filled skull, dug, doubtless, out of the old burying-ground.

On the other hand, the murderous attempt at wrecking the car and the grim joke on Rucker fitted the mountain-baron-henchman hypothesis most accurately; as did the fact, if it were a fact, that there were two persons concerned in the recent episode of the hardened steel cubes. There had been time, during the arousing of Carfax, for one man to disappear and for another to take his place; in which case it seemed evident that Hartridge had stood his ground merely to cover the retreat of the other man.

The puzzle promised to give a coherent hint pointing to its solution while Tregarvon was thinking it out and fitting the pieces together; and so long as the mental effort continued to feed the fire of wakefulness he was all that an alert sentinel should be. But after the various suppositions had been properly labelled and docketed and pigeonholed the physical reaction came, and drowsiness sat upon his shoulders, riding him like an Old Man of the Sea.

For a time he fought manfully, keeping up the struggle until he had exhausted every device he could think of and yielding only when he

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found himself actually falling asleep as he walked. The alternative to leaving the plant without a watchman was to call Carfax, and this he finally concluded to do. Groping his way blindly into the dark interior of the tool shack, he stumbled over the spare coil of rope, sat down upon it for a momentary rest, and in the flitting of a bat's wing was past help.

When he opened his eyes again the high-riding moon had swung far into the west, the glade was bathed in a ghostly flood of gray shadow, and Carfax was shaking him gently.

"Another act on," whispered the impromptu call-boy; "no speaking parts out, as yet—only pantomime. But it is worth sitting up to see."

Tregarvon, still sodden with sleep, suffered Carfax to lead him to the outlook window. In the gray shadows he presently made out the figure of another intruder. Within the area of the sunken graves a man, old and black, if the uncertain light could be trusted, was squatting on the ground and rocking himself back and forth, his swaying body keeping time with the measure of a weird, crooning melody. From time to time, he would stop the swaying movement to take a small white object from a basket at his side. These objects he appeared to be arranging in

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some sort of a figure on the ground to the accompaniment of the droning incantation.

"How long has he been there?" Tregarvon asked.

"Just a little while," was the low-toned reply. "I awoke about half an hour ago, and when I looked out, the moon was going over to the other edge of the world, and everything was quiet. A little later the basket man came; just appeared, you know, as if he had materialized out of the shadows. When I first noticed him he was doing his little song and dance, as you see him now."

"But what is the 'song and dance,' as you call it?"

"Write your guess on one side of a sheet of paper and send it to the puzzle editor," chuckled Carfax, adding: "If we had begun doing that at first, the editor would have a choice collection by this time, don't you think?"

"I have been making a few more guesses," Tregarvon offered. "I was coming in to unload them on you when my eyes went shut. What time is it?"

"About two o'clock—the real witching hour. I want to go home."

"Go out and tell the old conjurer yonder; perhaps he may have a magic square of carpet

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in his basket," suggested Tregarvon. Then: "Doesn't the wild and weird atmosphere of this heritage of mine get on your nerves to the queen's taste? Something doing all the time. I'm going to put a notice on the derrick frame: 'Don't shoot the stunt-setter; he is doing the best he can.'"

"Sh! what is the old 'ghost doctor' up to now?"

The droning chant had ceased and the old negro was crouching or kneeling at one end of the oblong figure traced by the enclosing row of white objects. The silence was profound; so complete that the snapping of a twig coming suddenly shattered it like the report of a pistol. Both of the watchers started at the sound, but the kneeling negro seemed not to have heard it.

"What was that?" whispered Carfax.

"I'm guessing once more: the obi-devil, possibly, coming in answer to the old medicine-man's prayers."

"Guess again!" Carfax thrust in excitedly. "Look this way—get a line on the corner of the derrick frame and follow it over into the woods. Do you see him?"

Tregarvon said "Yes," and began to grope for a weapon. A man, hatless and with a handker-

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chief bound about his head, was edging his way cautiously out of the undergrowth. In the hollow of his left arm he carried a gun, and his advance was like that of the deer-stalking hunter. With the derrick frame intervening it was to be inferred that he did not see the negro.

"Somebody pot-hunting for us, this time?" queried Carfax, under his breath; but Tregarvon pressed his arm for silence. The cautious approach was not in the direction of the tool shanty; it was toward the engine of the drilling installation.

"That is the fellow we want to surround," Tregarvon whispered. "If he had a hat on, I'd swear he was the man I saw kneeling under the derrick—before he made his drop-out and left Hartridge to throw dust for him! By Jove! he acts as if he were scared!"

The exclamation was not unwarranted. The man with the gun was creeping toward the portable engine, watchful and alert, starting at every whisper of the night air in the pines and exhibiting all the outward signs of an inward tension which was ready to snap and recoil in panic.

When he passed out of sight behind the derrick, Carfax would have led the charge; but Tregarvon restrained him. "Hold on," he advised.

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"We may as well wait and find out what he means to do."

The man was creeping on hands and knees when he came in sight again, and the gun had been left behind. When he stood up he was at the smoke-stack end of the engine boiler; and a moment further along the two watchers made out that he was unscrewing the fastenings of the iron door which gave access to the smoke-box and the flues. They waited until he had the door unfastened; saw him swing it open by slow inchings; saw him thrust an arm into the sooty depths of the smoke-box.

"*Now!*" Tregarvon commanded, setting the pace for the charge; but panic was before them. Just as the man was withdrawing his arm a deep groan shuddered upon the stillness. With a cry that was like the snarl of a cornered animal, the man leaped up and flung out his arms as if to ward a blow. At that the huddled figure kneeling among the sunken graves groaned again, following the groan with a terrified, "*Oh, my Lordy!*" when he saw the man at the boiler head.

That was sufficient. At the spot where the man with a handkerchief about his head had stood clutching the air there was a sudden void,

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and the noise of his crashing retreat through the undergrowth had died away before Tregarvon and Carfax could give chase.

They captured the "ghost doctor," however, and were not greatly surprised when the old negro turned out to be Uncle William. His night wandering to the mountain top was sufficiently explained when he pointed to the sunken grave ringed about with bits of broken china.

"Dah's whah my ol' 'ooman is, marstehs; yas, suh; right dah's whah dey bury huh. Dat triflin' niggah, Sam, from de ol' place, come erlong down de mounting day befo' yistidday, an' he say you-all gemman is a-trompin' 'round an' mashin' up t'ings in de ol' buryin'-ground. I know dat ain' so, but I says to mahse'f, 'Will-yum, yo' gwine right up dah and put dem li'l grabestones you been a-savin' 'round Mammy Ann; den Marsteh Tregarbin ain' gwine 'sturb nuffin' belongin' ter you.'"

"No," said Tregarvon soberly. "You may be sure we shan't disturb your wife's grave—or any of the others, if we can help it. I didn't know, until after we had begun work here, that this open place was a burying-ground. Now tell me; do you know who that man was who stood there by the engine and made motions at you?"

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"I 'spec' dat wuz de ol' debbil, hese'f, marsteh. Couldn't a-been nobody else; no, suh."

"What makes you think it was the devil, Uncle William?" Carfax wanted to know.

"'Cause he go off, *bing!* in a puff o' yaller smoke when I say '*Oh, my Lordy!*'"

Tregarvon had been groping purposefully in the old man's explanation to determine if it held any of the missing puzzle pieces.

"You say Sam, from the 'old place' told you we were working here, Uncle William; who is Sam, and where is the 'old place'?"

"Sam, he's dat triflin' no-'count niggah what Marsteh Judge keep for stable niggah—when dey ain' nuffin in de stable 'ceppin' de ol' dapple-gray dat's a heap older'n what I is, *hyuh, hyuh!* But de ol' Marsteh Judge ain' gwine tu'n nobody off'n de ol' place whilst dar's a rind o' bacon lef' in de gre't house; no, suh; he ain' gwine do dat!"

It was at this point that Tregarvon sprang his small trap.

"Why did he turn you off, Uncle William?"

"Who, me? No, suh—I—Miss Dick, she——"

"It's all right; never mind, Uncle William," Tregarvon hastened to say. "Now we'll undertake to keep the devil away while you go on

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setting your tombstones. I'm sorry we had to break in."

"Dey's all sot, yas, suh; dat's de bes' I kin do for ol' Mammy Ann. I's gwine tromp off down de mounting ag'in, now. Mus' be gettin' might' nigh de ol' man's bedtime; yas, suh; it sholy am dat. I's sayin' good night to you-all; an' t'ank yo' kin'ly, marstehs."

After the old negro had shuffled away on a short cut through the wood in the direction of the pike, the two young men took up the affair of the moment, which was to ascertain what the man with the bandaged head had been doing to the engine of the drilling plant. The smoke-box door was standing open, as he had left it, and Tregarvon struck a match and held it in the small sooty cavern. What he saw made him withdraw the match suddenly and blow it out.

"Did it bite you?" asked Carfax, genially quizzical.

Tregarvon's rejoinder was not in words. Thrusting an arm into the smoke-box he drew out a paper-wrapped cylinder with a capped fuse buried in one end of it, passing the find to Carfax with the remark: "I fancy we can stay awake until daybreak on the strength of that, don't you think, Poictiers?"

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"Dynamite!" gasped Carfax, holding the cartridge gingerly between thumb and finger and at arm's length.

"Yes, dynamite. It was poked into one of the flues with the business end toward the fire-box, and it made no account of Rucker, who would be the one to fire up the boiler before breakfast the day after to-morrow."

"Say, by Jove, Vance! this thing is getting serious!" exclaimed the golden youth, forgetting even the slight hint of a lisp. "We'll have to 'take measures,' as my father used to say. Come on over to the shanty and we'll get busy. I am in the same condition you said you were, a while back: I'm not sleepy now—don't know as I ever shall be again."

The talk on the door-step of the tool-house was prolonged far past Tregarvon's recounting of the suppositions pieced together in the period of his lonely sentry go. But it came back to the suppositions in the end, with Carfax checking off the probabilities on his finger-tips.

"So it figures out about this way," he said, not too cheerfully. "We have Judge Birrell as Lord High Executioner to a couple of receivers of stolen goods—always without his daughter's approval or consent, as a matter of course—and

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Professor Hartridge as his able deputy in the field. Then there is this skulking rascal of a dynamite-planter, who acts under orders, or possibly exceeds them now and then; and he seems to be the only one of the lot that we can satisfactorily pinch—when we shall be lucky enough to catch him. Uncle William isn't in it, is he?"

Tregarvon shook his head gloomily.

"I have been wrestling with that," he confessed. "He seems more than trustworthy. But he is evidently an old house servant of the judge's, and he was sent straight to me from Westwood. That is beyond question."

"As a spy?—perish the thought!" ranted Carfax, carefully concealing his earnestness with an overlaying of extravagance, as his habit was. "With the memory of Uncle William's unapproachable dinners in my mind—or mouth—I'll defend him to the last gasp."

"He is negligible," said Tregarvon briefly. "But this dynamiting emissary of Hartridge's, or the judge's, isn't. We must contrive to trap him in some way. If we don't, he will fool around until he hurts somebody."

"Yea, verily," Carfax laughed. "Any guesses coming to you?—as to who he is?"

"One small one; and it wouldn't be worth

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mentioning if it didn't fit in with some of the others. You saw that he was bareheaded?"

"Yes."

"And that he was wearing a handkerchief or a bandage of some sort instead of a hat?"

"Another 'yes'."

"Well, the day before yesterday the man we've been calling 'Morgan' was hurt by the falling walking-beam and had to have his head wrapped up in about the same way."

"All right; but Sherlock Holmes wouldn't stop with that."

"Neither do I. Tryon told me a little tale two days ago that possibly forges the connecting link. We know that both Morgan and Sill are McNabbs, and that for some reason of their own they dropped the surname when they hired out to me."

"Good!" Carfax approved. "The plot thickens. Can't you stir in a little more stiffening?"

"With the help of Tryon's story, I can. It seems that these men are, or have been, moon-shiners—breakers of the revenue laws. Some years ago the revenue officers raided their secret still, which was hidden somewhere in the Pocket, and arrested these two, with a number of others. Morgan McNabb and his brother were booked

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for the penitentiary; would have gone there if Judge Birrell hadn't come out of his retirement and fought for them."

Carfax was slowly filling the short pipe he had borrowed from his companion. "I begin to see daylight," he said. "What was the judge's motive?"

"A sort of clan loyalty, Tryon says. The McNabbs live on his land; they are 'his people'."

"Um," was the thoughtful comment. "And because the judge defends them, they take up the cudgels for him. We have to-morrow—or rather to-day—before us, with nothing especial to do; since Rucker will hardly be back with the drills before afternoon. Shall we telegraph to Hesterville for the sheriff, borrow Tait's team, and make a party call upon the man with the bandaged head?"

"That would be rather too summary, wouldn't it?" Tregarvon objected. "We may be well convinced, ourselves, but we have no direct evidence. Neither of us could go on the stand and swear that the man we saw at the boiler-head was Morgan McNabb."

"No; that is so. Past that, since I have asked the judge's daughter to consider me as a possible husband—" Carfax had called up

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the cherubic smile, but it had the opposite of a mollifying effect upon the objector.

"Don't harp on that part of it any more than you have to," was the morose interruption.

"I was going to say that the arrest of Morgan McNabb, just at this critical turn in the tide of affairs, might make it embarrassing for the judge; only you wouldn't let me finish," said Carfax, with great meekness.

"You are going to call on him?" demanded Tregarvon.

"Since he is Richardia's father, I don't see how I can well avoid it. To-morrow—or, I should say, to-day—is Friday, and I thought I'd ask Richardia to let me drive her over to Westwood House—if you'll lend me the motor-wagon after Rucker gets back."

Tregarvon rose and stood half-menacingly over the friend of his youth.

"If I thought you were only playing with her," he grated; but instead of saying what he would do in that case, he turned abruptly and went into the tool-house to fling himself down upon the cot, leaving Carfax to continue the night-watch or to abandon it, as he might choose.

XVI

A Friend at Need

WITH the object-lessons of the night of visitations to emphasize the need for vigilance, the two young men, discussing the situation in the gray dawn, agreed that the drilling plant must not be left unguarded during the Friday of enforced idleness, or at any other time. Accordingly, soon after sunrise, Carfax set out to walk down the mountain for the purpose of sending Tryon and a man or two of the track gang up to relieve Tregarvon.

This arrangement left the owner of the Ocoee to do sentry duty alone until Tryon should come—a duty which he scamped ingloriously by sitting upon the door-step of the tool shack and promptly falling asleep.

It was a brusque "Hello!" that awakened him, and he sprang up with a start to find a round-faced, pursy little man in pepper-and-salt garmentings and mouse-colored driving-gloves standing before him. A horse and buggy motionless in the edge of the glade accounted

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for the manner of the visitor's coming, but not for its object. Tregarvon took a good look at the stranger before he committed himself, even to a greeting. The round face, with its twinkling eyes, double chin, and the little patches of closely cropped side-whisker, was altogether reassuring; it not only beamed good-nature, it fairly shone with an irresistible kindness. Tregarvon, gathering his scattered wits as he could, said: "Good morning; it's a fine morning for a drive through the woods."

The little man added another layer of geniality to his smile.

"It's a fine morning, also, for a nap in the sunshine," he reciprocated. "Do you belong to the out-of-door sleepers—the 'simple-lifers'—Mr. Tregarvon?"

"Not permanently," laughed Tregarvon; "though I must confess that I am so simple as not to be able to recall your name."

"Good, dev'lish good!" chuckled the visitor. "Couldn't have turned it more neatly myself, 'pon my word! I'm Thaxter; Wilmerding's bookkeeper at Whitlow. One of my fads is to take a drive before breakfast. Excellent habit, Mr. Tregarvon; I can recommend it most highly. Gives you an appetite like a coal-heaver. Speak-

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ing of coal—how are you getting along taking soundings on the old Ocoee? Have you hit it yet?”

“Not yet,” Tregarvon admitted, warming to the little man’s friendly interest. “But I am still living in hopes.”

Mr. Thaxter pursed his lips in a way to make them match the general effect of rotundity.

“Mighty mean thing to say to a man before breakfast—you haven’t breakfasted yet, I dare say—but you are butting your head against a stone wall, Mr. Tregarvon. Haven’t they told you that?”

“If your ‘they’ refers to the Coalville gossips, I have been duly warned. They told me, with all the variations, before I’d had time to climb the mountain on my first exploring expedition.”

“Just so; but not specifically, I suppose. You should have come to me. While I am an employee of the C. C. & I. Company, my payroll connection wouldn’t have kept me from doing you a good turn. And I could have given you chapter, page, and verse.”

For the moment Tregarvon lost sight of the fact that Wilmerding had reported his book-keeper totally barren of Ocoee information. So he said: “Possibly you will do it now, Mr.

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Thaxter. We are mere babes in the wood, Carfax and I, needing a guardian angel pretty severely, if we are to believe what other people say of us."

"You have certainly been needing a little friendly counsel from some one who was in a position to know what he was talking about. You'll never find your coal up here, Mr. Tregarvon."

"That is what they all say; but they don't tell us precisely why we shan't."

"Ah," said the kindly one, shaking his head in deprecation. "Human nature is the same everywhere. Tait could have told you, or Tryon, or Walters; all of them who have lived here long enough. But you had money and were willing to spend it. It would have been killing the golden-egged goose to have driven you away."

Tregarvon grinned. "Thank you for trying to break it gently to me, Mr. Thaxter; but I am braced for it now. Hurl it in."

"They could have told you that this test-boring experiment of yours has been tried before, all over the mountain top. I presume I could show you a dozen holes, if they are not all filled up with wash and hidden under the leaves."

Tregarvon was thinking hard.

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"Does Captain Duncan know this?" he asked.

"I should suppose so; he ought to know it. The testing was done by the New Ocoee Coal Company, and it may have timed itself during the summer that Duncan spent in the West. Come to think, I believe it did. You advised with him, of course; surely he didn't encourage you to spend money on the property, did he?"

"No; I am obliged to confess that he did not. On the contrary, he advised me not to."

The little man's smile became benignantly tolerant. "You young men are like Mr. Kipling's puppy at times; you *will* chew soap, knowing perfectly well that it is soap."

Tregarvon's answering laugh admitted the justness of the charge.

"Possibly some of us like the flavor of soap," he retorted. "There is no accounting for the depravity of some tastes, you know."

"Oh, well," said the visitor, with the air of one who is far too wise to combat the vagaries of youth, "go on and have your fling. It is harmless enough. If you can afford to buy a little amusement in this way, why shouldn't you do it? It won't hurt you, and it is a God-send to Tait and the poor devils on your payroll while it lasts."

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"But if I can't afford it?" suggested Tregarvon.

"Ah; that is another matter. From what Wilmerding has let fall, I have been assuming that you and Mr. Carfax desired the experience and the fun of it rather than any possible money gain."

"The money side of it may not appeal to Carfax; but it does to me, very forcibly."

"Still, you are throwing good money after bad in putting down these test-holes."

Tregarvon shrugged his shoulders. "What would you?" he asked. "I inherited the Ocoee, and it is up to me to make something out of it, if I can."

The round-bodied bookkeeper laughed until he shook like a bowl of jelly.

"It is very evident, Mr. Tregarvon, that you were born in the purple. If you wish to make money out of the Ocoee, why don't you sell it?"

"Because I should first have to find a purchaser, and before I could find a purchaser—I should think—it would be a condition precedent that I should find the coal. It resolves itself into the vicious circle, as you see."

Mr. Thaxter smote his gloved hands together softly and appeared to be debating a nice point

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with himself. When he spoke again his manner had lost the touch of brisk impersonality.

"Pardon me if I seem to crowd the mourners," he apologized, "but it strikes me that this is a matter in which the good-natured bystander may quite properly take a hand. Is it possible that you haven't been told of the offer made by our people to your father?"

"It is more than possible; it is a fact."

"I am truly astonished! Your lawyers must know of it."

"There has never been any mention of it made to me. What was the offer?"

"If I remember correctly, it was one hundred thousand dollars for all the titles."

"Thank you!" exclaimed Tregarvon triumphantly. "That is the best news I've heard in many a day. If your company ever made any such an offer as that, it proves conclusively that there is coal in the property, somewhere."

The bookkeeper shook his round head in evident dismay.

"Dear, dear!" he lamented; "I was afraid you might jump at some such conclusion as that, and it puts me in a rather awkward position. As I have said, I am only a pay-roll man in Consolidated Coal; I'm not even one of its many super-

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intendents. Yet, as man to man, perhaps I may venture to tell you just why the C. C. & I. might still be willing to pay you the price named, though in telling you I may be betraying an official secret. You probably know that your property line on the north abuts on the Whitlow lands about an eighth of a mile from your tramway?"

Tregarvon nodded.

"Very good. Now we have a vein of coal quite near this joint boundary; not a very thick vein, but one which could be made to pay for working if we could send the coal down over your tramway, and coke it in your old ovens at Coalville, but which would not pay if we should be obliged to build a new tramway to get at it. That is the whole thing in a nutshell."

"You say that this offer of a hundred thousand for the Ocoee was once made to my father? It's odd that I had never heard of it. Was it in any sense a standing offer?"

"It was at the time, and I think it still is, though there has been no talk of it latterly, so far as I know. But since the reasons for making it still exist, I should imagine that you would stand a good chance of reviving it if you should care to do so."

"If I only had a little breakfast in me!" Tre-

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garvon protested half-jokingly. "I'm too hungry to talk hundred-thousand-dollar deals with you with any assurance that an empty stomach isn't making me flighty, Mr. Thaxter."

The bookkeeper laughed pleasantly.

"There are your men coming over from the tramhead," he said. "Give them your orders, and then let me drive you down to Coalville to your breakfast. Perhaps you'll be willing to give me a bite, too, and in that case I shall have the pleasure of meeting Mr. Carfax again. I didn't more than half get acquainted with him the day he drove up to Whitlow."

"You are certainly the jolliest lot of commercial pirates a man ever had to fight—you people up at the C. C. & I.," said Tregarvon, after he had climbed into the buggy with Thaxter and the spirited black horse was flinging the soft sand of the wood road from his hoofs. "First, Wilmerding comes to the rescue; and now you are trying to give us a lift. It's heart-warming."

Thaxter's rejoinder had just the requisite touch of friendly solicitude in it.

"Then you meant what you said a few moments ago, about the financial aspect of the—of your experiment? A hundred thousand dollars would be worth considering?"

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"That amount would look as big as a hundred thousand cart-wheels to me, just now," Tregarvon confided. "My father is dead, as I suppose you know, and there have been family misfortunes big enough to sink a ship. A hundred thousand would give us a fresh start in the world."

"Then we must certainly try to get it for you," was the affable rejoinder; and from this on, the spirited horse demanded Thaxter's undivided attention, so pointedly that the bookkeeper did not even seem to see Professor Hartridge when the buggy whirled past that gentleman as he was returning from his morning walk down the pike.

Carfax was waiting breakfast on Tregarvon when the black horse came to a stand at the door of the Ocoee office-building. The young millionaire remembered Thaxter perfectly, and seemed to be glad to renew his acquaintance with the "Brother Cheeryble." Yet it was Carfax's judicious applying of the brakes at the breakfast-table conference of three that kept Tregarvon from committing himself too definitely in the matter of bargain and sale.

Nevertheless, the talk over the ham and eggs pushed the business affair considerably farther along on the road to a tentative conclusion. Before he took his leave to continue his return drive

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to Whitlow, Thaxter was authorized to communicate by wire with the New York headquarters of Consolidated Coal, and, without betraying any confidences, to ascertain if the offer of one hundred thousand dollars for the Ocoee properties still held good.

After Thaxter had taken his departure, and the two young experimenters had threshed the new prospect out to its final straw, the wakeful night came in for its revenges, and they slept through the forenoon. Rucker did not return from Whitlow with the car and the repointed drills until long after the noon meal; and when he came he found his two employers waiting impatiently for him—or rather for the car. The reason for the impatience was a note from Miss Richardia sent down by the college mail-carrier early in the afternoon; a brief message addressed to both, begging them to come to Highmount at the earliest possible moment: urgency only; no hint of what had happened or was due to happen.

They made the ascent of the mountain as rapidly as the big touring-car could measure the distance, and were met at the door of the administration building of the college, not by Miss Birrell, but by Professor Hartridge, who led them into the visitors' parlor and calmly informed them

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that Miss Richardia had driven to Westwood House with her father shortly after luncheon.

"By Jove, now!" lisped Carfax; "that's rather curious, don't you know!" And Tregarvon was quite speechless.

"Curious that Miss Birrell should ask you to come up here, and then run away?" said Hartridge. "It was a little ruse of mine, and Miss Richardia is altogether blameless. I wished very much to see you both, and I was afraid you might be foolish enough to disregard an invitation bearing my name. So I took Miss Richardia into my confidence, and she very obligingly wrote the note which, I assume, has brought you here."

Carfax snapped his fingers and laughed softly.

"Upon what footing do we stand with you, Mr. Hartridge?—upon that of yesterday at dinner-time or upon that of a later hour, when I had the pleasure of helping you on with your overcoat?"

"I shouldn't presume to say, Mr. Carfax; you must make your own attitude. But if that attitude should be inimical, I must still beg you to believe that I have decoyed you up here to do you a kindness."

Carfax was still smiling affably. "Is it Virgil who puts it into the mouth of one of his char-

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acters to say that we should beware of the Greeks bringing gifts, professor? You will pardon us if we seem a bit suspicious, won't you? But this"—he held up the small cube of hardened steel which he happened to have in his pocket—"this is so completely convincing, you know."

The mild-eyed mathematician waved the evidence aside as a thing of small moment.

"Now that you have had time to consider, I am sure you absolve me from the charge of having tampered with your drill-hole," he deprecated.

"We do," said Carfax. "All you did was to cover the retreat of the man who really did the tampering. But that is sufficient to make us—er—a bit cautious, as you might say."

Hartridge smiled in his turn. "You are basing your caution upon a small specimen of the metal commercially known as steel which you chanced to find in my pocket," he remarked. "Let us disregard the bit of steel for the time being, if you please. If you should happen to lose it, it could be very easily replaced; but"—he turned short upon Tregarvon—"you can't replace the Ocoee if you allow Mr. Thaxter to persuade you to sell it to Consolidated Coal, Mr. Tregarvon."

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"What's that?" exclaimed the Ocoee owner, starting from his chair; and Carfax fell back upon his strongest expletive, "By Jove!"

Hartridge appeared to be entirely at ease now. He seated himself and crossed his long legs comfortably.

"You are puzzled to account for my friendly interest?—after last night?" he inquired. "I don't blame you, and I am only sorry that I cannot explain more fully. But I may say this: if you part with the Ocoee properties for any such sum as Mr. Thaxter has doubtless offered you, you will regret it as long as you live."

Carfax got his breath sufficiently after a time to say: "May—may we venture to ask how you know what Mr. Thaxter has offered?"

"Certainly. The offer of one hundred thousand dollars for the lands, titles, and mineral rights of the property is no secret—or at least it was not during Mr. Tregarvon's father's lifetime. I am merely assuming that Thaxter has not increased it; and I am also assuming that a renewal of the offer was the reason for his early morning drive with Mr. Tregarvon."

"And you say Vance will be sorry if he accepts the offer?"

"I do; most decidedly."

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Carfax leaned forward and held up an accusing finger.

"Then you know, of your own knowledge, that there is a workable vein of coal on the property, Mr. Hartridge," he snapped.

"That, my dear sir, is an assumption which I must decline to confirm."

"Nevertheless, it is true. And here is another to go with it: *you know where that vein can be found!*"

Hartridge smiled again.

"You are, constructively at least, my guest, Mr. Carfax; I should be unpardonably rude if I were to contradict you."

Carfax glanced aside at Tregarvon, and Tregarvon returned the glance as one who sees the shore from the crest of a tossing wave, but has no hope of reaching it. After a little pause Carfax renewed the attack.

"This is a most extraordinary situation, don't you think, Mr. Hartridge?" he began mildly. "Would a definite quantity of the thing known commercially as money tend to relieve it in any way?"

The professor's answer was prompt and decisive. "You are assuming that I have information to sell? I have not."

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Carfax countered quickly.

"Then why have you just given us this pointer on Consolidated Coal? You profess to be willing to help us and you refuse to help us in one and the same breath."

"Oh, if you are going into motives, my dear sir, that is, indeed, a very deep subject. It would hardly be profitable to discuss it, even academically. Life, the really human variety of life, is full of paradoxes. You are wondering why the man from whom, a few hours ago, you took that small cube of steel, is now apparently trying to save you from loss. Call it one of the human paradoxes, if you will; only don't sell to Consolidated Coal for a paltry hundred thousand dollars a property upon which more than three or four times that amount has been spent. This is what I enticed you up here to say to you; and having said it——"

"Hold on," Carfax interposed. "We have met some curious varieties of the genus enemy in this forgotten corner of the world, and you will pardon me if I say that you are not the least remarkable specimen, Mr. Hartridge. We are thankful for the pointer, and much more thankful for the assurance you have given us that we are not fishing in a barren pond. We——"

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The professor had risen and was moving toward the door.

"I have given you no such specific assurance," he denied.

"No," said Tregarvon, getting upon his feet and putting in a word for himself. "You may congratulate yourself upon your discretion. None the less, we shall continue to work on our problem, Mr. Hartridge, until we have found the value of ' π '."

It was a centre shot, visibly and palpably piercing the bull's-eye. A blow would scarcely have disconcerted the schoolmaster more effectively. Yet he recovered instantly, had blandly excused himself upon the plea of pressing laboratory work, and was bowing himself out at the door, when he fired the return shot.

"You have set yourselves an impossible task, gentlemen," he offered mildly. "You forget that the value of ' π ' has never yet been exactly ascertained."

"Well, what do you make of it all?" Tregarvon asked, when the yellow car was rolling smoothly down the mountain pike on the return to Coalville.

"Nothing; except a disappointment for Mr. Thaxter," was Carfax's reply.

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"Thaxter; yes. Do you know, Poitiers, I'm beginning to smell brimstone in *his* clothes, now. Wilmerding told us definitely, if you remember, that Thaxter gave him to understand that he didn't have any data on the Ocoee; didn't know anything remotely concerning it. There is a lie out, somewhere."

"Which doesn't matter now, thanks to Mr. William Wilberforce Hartridge, the man of mixed motives," said Carfax definitively.

"You think, on the strength of Hartridge's warning, that I shouldn't sell to Consolidated Coal?"

Carfax was driving the car and he let the brakes out until the machine was dropping down the grade like a stone falling from a height.

"Not in a thousand years!" he said.

XVII

An Anticlimax

BRIGHT and early on the Saturday morning the two young men, with the repointed drill bits in the car, drove to the mountain top, carrying Rucker's breakfast in a basket generously filled by Mrs. Tryon. They found the mechanic, who had resumed his job of night-watching, already up and stirring, with the engine fired and ready for starting, and there were no disturbances to report.

"Did a little stunt of my own," Rucker explained with a grin, showing a concealed wire which ran all around the glade and led to the tool-house. "Yesterday, up at Whitlow, I fished an electric bell out of the scrap heap, and last night, before I went to bed, I rigged it so that if anybody come monkeyin' 'round, it'd ring and wake me up. I guess there wa'n't any ghost-walkin'. The bell didn't ring, and everything was all shipshape this mornin'."

Soon after this the drilling was resumed, not, however, until after the hole had been carefully washed and swabbed out. Tregarvon did not

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take any of his men into his confidence to the extent of explaining the reason for the extra care, but during the swabbing process he stood aside and looked on, watchful to detect any sign of guilty knowledge on the part of his helpers. Particularly he studied the face of the younger McNabb, the one who had been hurt still being absent. The effort went for nothing. If isolation has been sparing of gifts to the native of the southern Appalachians, it has at least given him a face that no man can read. The bushy-bearded Sawyer, the head driller, was the only one who commented upon the hole-cleaning.

"Hit don't look t' me like thar was anything more'n the drill dust to be warshed out," he grumbled, when the swab came up clean; and to prove it he rubbed some of the powdered rock cuttings between his thumb and finger.

"It's better to be sure than sorry," said Tregarvon. "If we know that the hole is clean to begin with, we're that much ahead."

In due course of time the engine was started, the drill lowered, and the churning was resumed. Very shortly it became evident that the steel was cutting again at the usual rate, and Tregarvon's spirits rose accordingly.

"Do you know, Poictiers, I believe we are

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going to 'prove up' right here on this spot?" he predicted, after the work was well under way and they had gone to sit on the tool-house step. "The indications all point for us. Here is where the most determined fight has been made to stop us; here is where we find Hartridge's hieroglyphics on the trees; and right here, if you'll remark it, is where Mr. Onias Thaxter hunts me up to make me a blanket offer for my landholdings."

"A little more time will tell the story," Carfax suggested. "By noon, if it doesn't strike any more bones, the drill ought to be down to the coal, if there is any coal here."

With hope trotting cheerfully on ahead, the forenoon became a period of exciting suspense. Each time the drill was withdrawn the cuttings were examined eagerly. The rock was showing all the characteristics of the former borings: fine sandstone, coarse sandstone, some little conglomerate, and, just before the noon hour, the shales which commonly overlies the coal in the Cumberland region.

"We're coming to it!" Tregarvon exulted, when the washings which came up in the churning began to show black. "Eighteen inches more, and we'll know whether we live or die!" And he

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carefully made a chalk-mark on the drill so that they might determine when the critical depth was reached.

As in the previous tests, the steel sank rapidly in the vein of coal. At a foot of additional depth the washings were still coming up black. At sixteen inches there was no change. Sighting across a derrick brace, Tregarvon watched the chalk-mark with the blood racing in his veins. With each plunge of the heavy steel drill his hopes rose higher. Already he was anticipating a future which, if it should lack some of the ecstasies, would still have a sufficiency of the great emollient—money. With a fortune of his own, the impossible situation which had grown out of the Uncle Byrd legacy would be alleviated, and he saw himself deeding his half of the legacy irrevocably over to Elizabeth. The pride wound thus healed, the broken bones of sentiment might be allowed to knit as they would. Doubtless, in time, the knitting process would accomplish itself, and possibly without leaving him a hopeless cripple. Judging from the past, Elizabeth would not expect much; and even if he should be obliged to limp a little she would probably never notice it.

“Eighteen inches!” he called out to Carfax, “and she’s still bringing up the black-diamond

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dust! Get ready to blow the hewgag and beat the tom-tom. We're in it, this time!"

"Easy!" Carfax cautioned. "Don't let your hopes soar too high. Maybe the top vein runs a little thicker at this point than it did in the others. Call it that, anyway, until you're cock-sure."

As he spoke the power went off. Tregarvon jerked his watch from his pocket and stifled a hard word. It was noon, and the men were knocking off work on the dot, quite as nonchalantly as if the fate of empires were not hanging upon the result of a few more turns of the machinery. Tregarvon tramped across to the tool-house with Carfax, a sudden weariness making his feet heavy as lead.

"That's the workman of it!" he gritted. "If the world were coming to an end in the next five minutes, they'd stop to eat!"

Carfax permitted himself a subdued chuckle.

"You are beautifully on edge," he asserted. "A few inches more may mean a lot to you, but it's all in the day's work for the men. They're not going to get rich out of your coal mine."

They had brought some of Uncle William's biscuits and cold chicken for the midday snack, and Carfax went to the motor-car, which had

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been left standing in the wood road, for the basket. When he returned, Tregarvon was pacing back and forth impatiently before the tool-house door, and Rucker was sitting on the step, eating his luncheon. Carfax carried the basket inside, and they made a table of the coil of rope. While they were picking the chicken bones, the mechanician spoke again of a matter that he had mentioned once or twice before.

"I'm beefin' ag'in about that boiler, Mr. Tregarvon," he began, between workman mouthfuls of Mrs. Tryon's corn bread. "She ain't much, just as I told you at first; and draggin' her 'round over this mountain hain't helped her none. She's leakin' like a sieve at the fire-box end of her flues, right now."

"Here's hoping that this is the last hole we'll have to drill with it, Billy," said Tregarvon cheerfully. "I bought it second-hand, and the Chattanooga junk man put one over on me."

"He sure did," Rucker returned with a grin. "She's rotten. Every time the pop-valve goes off it makes me jump. One o' these days——"

The interruption was a blatant roar from the boiler in question. Rucker had prudently shut the drafts and had left the fire-door open, or he thought he had, but still the pressure had crept

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up, until now the safety-valve was relieving it. Through the open door of the tool shack the two at the rope-coil table could see the plant, with the plume of escaping steam rising to the height of the tree-tops. As usual during the noon hour, there was not a man of the gang in sight. Tregarvon had early learned that a part of the country laborer's reticence expressed itself in a dislike to eat under the boss's eye. At the stopping of the machinery the drill gang would scatter in the wood, each man to his fallen log.

The roar of the safety-valve continuing, and seeming to increase in stridency rather than to diminish, Tregarvon leaned forward to shout in Rucker's ear:

"Are you sure you left the fire-box door open, Billy?"

The mechanician struggled to his feet. "I thought I was, but I'll go see. She's howlin' a little bit too loud to suit me."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the earthquake crash came. With a sound that was oddly like the tearing of a hundred saws through dry timber, followed by a reverberating thunderclap, the boiler and engine vanished in a thick cloud of steam, and the air was filled with flying missiles. One piece of the

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boiler tore the heart out of the sheltering oak-tree; another fragment ripped a corner from the tool-house; a third mowed a swath through a thicket of young pines.

Tregarvon and Carfax were both up and out before the nimbus cloud of steam had blown aside, and their first thought was for their men. Rucker had escaped only by a hair's-breadth. The twisted fire-box sheet which had knocked a corner out of the small building had passed so close that the wind of it had bowled him over. Tregarvon left Carfax to help the machinist to his feet, and ran shouting across the glade. The drill gang answered and came hurrying in, a man at a time. When all were accounted for, the material loss was inventoried. It was total, so far as it went. The engine and boiler were reduced to a tangled heap of scrap; one end of the drill beam was shattered, and one leg of the derrick had suffered loss.

For the moment Tregarvon was torn by conflicting emotions; a huge thankfulness that no life had been lost and bitter disappointment that the catastrophe had come at the instant when all the doubts as to the value of the Ocoee were to be either confirmed or swept away. He held himself together long enough to tell the

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men that they might go home—that there would be nothing more done until a new power-plant could be bought; but when Rucker had gone out to the wood road to see if the yellow car had been hit, and the disappointed one was left alone with Carfax, the flood-gates gave way.

“Isn’t it enough to make an angel out of the blue heavens swear himself black in the face, Poitiers?” he raged. “Just on the very edge of things—just as we were going to find out, once for all, what this cursed mountain is going to do to us——”

“One thing at a time,” Carfax broke in soothingly. “The wrecked engine isn’t fatal—not by many parasangs: it came just in the nick of time, when I was wondering what under the sun I should do with the dividend draft that I got in the mail yesterday. Take a fresh grip on yourself and remember that you have a good bit to be thankful for. If your men had been sitting around on the job to eat their dinners, as laborers do up North, there’d be another story to tell.”

“Yes, I know; but think of it—it will be days and maybe weeks before we can get a new power-plant installed, and all that time we’ll be hang-

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ing, like Mahomet's coffin, between heaven and earth; won't know any more than we do now."

Rucker had come back to report that the motor-car had escaped as by a miracle. A square yard of the boiler shell had been hurled over it to fall accurately in the middle of the road a rod or two farther on. While he was telling about it, a goodly portion of the faculty of Highmount College, followed by a bevy of young women, came upon the scene. Doctor Caswell was heading the column of reconnaissance, and Hartridge also was with it.

"Dear me!" exclaimed the president, coming up breathless; "we are all so glad to find you alive! What has happened?"

Tregarvon pointed to the tangled mass of wreckage. "Our boiler blew up. It was old, and I suppose we were carrying too much pressure. Luckily, it happened while the men were eating, and there was no one near enough to be hurt. I thought of you people at once. It must have made racket enough to make you think the end of the world was coming."

"It was frightful!" said Miss Farron. "The windows rattled and—" but here her voice was lost in the chorus of excited exclamations pitching themselves in many keys as the young

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women picked their way over to the wreck and viewed the remains.

"It is well, sometimes, to be born both lucky and rich," Hartridge commented gravely, when his turn came. "The material loss is serious enough, of course; but you ought to be thankful that no lives were lost. Were you near enough at the time to see the explosion?"

"We were sitting in the tool-house eating our luncheon," Carfax explained, "and Rucker was just outside. We had been speaking of the boiler a moment before. We were all three looking at it, I think, when it went up."

Doctor Caswell had taken his wife over to assist in the sight-seeing, but Hartridge lingered behind.

"Happening in broad daylight, this way, with three of you looking on, I suppose you are well assured that it was a pure accident?" he suggested quietly.

Tregarvon left the answer to Carfax, who made it promptly.

"As you say, we are not able, this time, to blame any one but ourselves. The boiler was old, and our mechanic had told us that it was not altogether safe."

"You have been drilling to-day?"

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Carfax nodded.

"May I ask if you found anything?"

Tregarvon turned away and busied himself examining the rent in the corner of the tool shanty. Carfax called up the cherubic smile for the inquiring professor and said: "What if I should tell you that we have found our bonanza, Mr. Hartridge?"

Hartridge glanced at the drill, which was still standing in the test-hole, and shook his head. "I should say that you are merely talking for effect," he smiled back.

"But we have found the coal," Carfax persisted.

"You have found the upper measure, the same as you have in all the other trials. Beneath it, you will find your sandstone dike again."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

"But we have already reached a depth of more than eighteen inches, and the drill was still in coal when we shut down for the noon stop."

"That is quite immaterial," was the cool-voiced reply. "The measures vary in thickness, though not greatly. Geology is one of my small side-lines, Mr. Carfax, and I have made a study of this particular region, largely as a pastime."

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The sight-seers were straggling back, and Tregarvon was explaining to a group of breathless maidens just where he had been sitting with Carfax at the moment of catastrophes, and how Rucker had been knocked down by the wind of the fragment which had struck the corner of the tool-shed. Carfax saw his opportunity preparing to take its leave and he smiled, level-eyed, at Hartridge.

"You are still on the obstructive hand, aren't you?" he threw in. "Even now, you would like to discourage us if you could."

The professor of mathematics and other things was turning away to join the others, but he paused for a low-toned rejoinder.

"I neither deny nor affirm, Mr. Carfax. But I may say this much: if I were in your shoes, or Mr. Tregarvon's, I shouldn't call to-day's disaster a pure accident—until I could prove it."

And with that he turned his back and began to talk to the art teacher.

XVIII

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INTENT upon the swift purchase of another power-plant, Tregarvon caught an afternoon freight on the branch railroad, made a late train on the main line, and was obliged to spend the Sunday in Chattanooga, with little to console him save the thought that he would be on hand to transact business with the machinery merchants bright and early Monday morning.

It was a sad Sunday, weatherwise, with a chill autumn rain sweeping the streets of the battle-field city, and the crest of Lookout Mountain veiled in cloud. Tregarvon had made a few business acquaintances in town on previous purchasing expeditions, but there were no familiar faces in the hotel; nothing to lighten the monotony of a dreary day of enforced idleness.

In such circumstances impatience becomes a rat to gnaw the vitals. The suspense, the tormenting uncertainty which he had left behind him in the unfinished test-hole on the summit of Mount Pisgah, would have been hard to endure even in a whirlwind of work; and upon a day

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when he could neither work nor play he was in despair.

After the noon meal, which figured as "Luncheon" on the hotel bill of fare, and was, in point of fact, a heavy and dispiriting midday dinner, he braved the elements and went in a closed sight-seeing car to the Chickamauga battle-field. The drive proved to be a damp test of endurance, and he brought nothing back from it better than a memory of rain-sodden fields and forest; of endless colonnades of gray, ghostly monuments, a majority of them assuring the beholder in letters of granite that here the Ohio troops fought nobly; of parkings of ancient cannon, the guns pointing in so many different directions that no human being could guess which way the battle had run; of the droning singsong of the chauffeur pouring his explanation patter into the reversed megaphone for the benefit of his few fares.

The return to the hotel was merely a change from outdoor dreariness to indoor. The lobby was a gathering-ground for a scattering of disgruntled tourists, who had used their battle-field stop-over privilege only to find themselves marooned by the weather. Tregarvon smoked in solitary misery for what remained of the afternoon, and past the evening meal, begged some of

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the hotel stationery, and wrote a letter to Elizabeth Wardwell.

"It is a sin and a shame to write you after such a day as I've been wearing out here," he began, "but you know my weakness for afflicting other people—for unloading my woes upon the nearest pair of sympathetic shoulders. Your shoulders have always been that; and sometimes I wonder that you can still stand up straight and queenly, as you do, after having carried so many of my burdens." Here followed an account of the events of the exciting Saturday forenoon, and he tried, as well as the written words would serve, to transmit some picture of the boiler explosion, tagged with an attempt to portray the tenterhooks of suspense upon which the disaster had impaled him.

"You see where it leaves me," he went on; "still in the air as to whether the Ocoee is something or nothing. For a few little minutes, after the drill had passed the eighteen-inch dead-line, I saw rose-colored, saw my chance to provide for the home-folks, and to ignore forever and a day, the Uncle Byrd legacy. But now I am no better assured than I was before we began drilling; and, to make it more interesting, Hartridge happened along after the explosion—the whole col-

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lege turned out and came tramping over through the wood to see what had broken loose—and he says the sandstone dike is still under us. We shan't know positively, of course, until we can get a new engine, and haul it by inches up the mountain, and drag it into place and set it going; and by that time I shall be a raving maniac.

"In all this new trouble, Poictiers has been all that you'd expect him to be; a friend to tie to. He doesn't lend me money; he simply tosses me his purse. I have his last dividend check in my pocket at this present moment, and I'm to cash it to-morrow morning to pay for the new engine. I suppose I needn't say that I should have been out of the fight down here long ago if he hadn't joined me and given me a checking account. He is pure gold, Elizabeth; and yet——

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"The gap represents a good half-hour, my dear cousin, in which I have been sitting here at this dinky little table in the hotel writing-room, trying to screw my courage to the sticking-place. What I have to tell you concerns four people, and you are one of the four. I've written you a lot about Richardia Birrell—she's another one of the four—in the past few weeks, and I have

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been assuring myself all along that I have been telling you all there was to tell.

"That isn't strictly true, Elizabeth. There was a thing that I wouldn't admit, even to myself; but I had to admit it three days ago when Poictiers told me that he had asked Richardia to be his wife. I knew then what Richardia had done to me, and for a bad half-hour I—well, I'm not going into details; it is enough to say that I'm not fit to be your door-mat, Betha, dear—nor Poictiers Carfax's, for that matter.

"What can I say for myself more than I have said a hundred times in the past? Nothing, I imagine; I'm simply hopeless where the eternal feminine is concerned. You've known it ever since we went to school together, and you've promised to marry me in spite of the knowledge. I shall not be a faithless husband, my dear—I know I shan't be that; and this last and most humiliating lapse could never have amounted to anything, anyway, even if Poictiers had not slammed the door in my face. But it is your right to know about it; to know that for some few days or hours or minutes, as the case may be, I was daffy, foolish, a simpleton from the idiotic wards, with a slant toward depravity.

"You see now what an incredible friend Poic-

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tiers is. I've never thought of him as a marrying man, and I could swear, even now, that he isn't in love with Richardia—though I don't quite see how any free man with live blood in him could help being. Let that go: Poictiers has killed my temptation for me. He has asked Richardia to marry him, and he and she are good enough for each other—which is the highest praise I can offer to either. Poictiers will get a wife who could make any man happy; and Richardia will be able to restore the Birrell fortunes, which, as you have doubtless gathered from my earlier letters, are pretty sadly in need of a rich marriage.

“This leaves us two to face things as they are as best we can, Elizabeth. After what I have written down in this letter, can you still care enough for me, and for the conventions and the wishes of the families on both sides, to—not to forgive me; I'm not going to ask that—but to take me just as I am, and let things go on as before? I shan't blame you in the least if you can't, you know; but if it must come to a break between us, you must let me be the one to make the break. By all right and reason the Uncle Byrd legacy is yours; and whatever happens, I promise you I shall never touch a penny of it.

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"Good night, my dear. My love for you is precisely the same as it has always been. The madness which Richardia Birrell was stirring up in me was something entirely different, and no doubt everybody would say it was worlds less worthy."

Tregarvon had a bad habit of not reading his letters after they were written and signed, and he did not break the habit now. Folding, sealing, and addressing his confession, he went to the lobby to mail it. Thanks to the rainy Sunday, the hotel mail-box was stuffed to repletion with week-end missives, and Tregarvon, after trying in vain to wedge his own through the slit, exemplified his careless habit by leaving it on top of the box with the newspapers.

Later in the evening there were other additions made to the overflow newspaper mail, and some one, still more careless than the Philadelphian, displaced the letter, which fell, unnoted, to the floor. Here, during the small hours, one of the sweepers found it; and since some muddy boot heel had defaced the postage-stamp, and all but obliterated the address, the sweeper passed his find on to the night clerk. At this point another phase of Tregarvon's heedlessness came to the fore. He had neglected to put his own name and

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address in the corner of the envelope, hence the clerk had no means of identifying the sender. Being a young man of resource, he enclosed the letter, just as it was, in a larger envelope, copying, or trying to copy, the address. But the marring boot heel had done its work too thoroughly. The Philadelphia street number was entirely effaced; and "Miss Elizabeth Wardwell" became, in the night clerk's transcription, "Miss Eliza Bell Woodwell."

Tregarvon was astir early on the Monday morning, was fortunate enough to be able to purchase the new power-plant without waiting to have it shipped in from some Northern supply house, hustled busily until he had seen his purchase entrained for Coalville, and took the afternoon local for his return. As often happened, the local was late, and he found Carfax waiting dinner for him when he dropped off on the office-building side of the train at the home station.

Over Uncle William's chicken gumbo the talk ran easily upon the business affair. Tregarvon had driven a rather good bargain on the new engine, and was inclined to expatiate upon it. In reality, however, he was trying to postpone the moment when Carfax should begin to talk of the more intimate things. That moment came

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with the pipe-filling before the cheerful wood-fire, after Uncle William had cleared the table and disappeared.

"After you left, Saturday, I took Hartridge's hint and went into the explosion details a little deeper," said Carfax. "Rucker stayed with me and lent me his mechanical wit."

"What is the verdict?"

"It is the Scotch verdict: 'Not proven,'" was the thoughtful rejoinder. "Knowing, as we do, that at least one attempt was made to dynamite the boiler, I may have been oversuspicious. In such circumstances the judicial frame of mind is hard to attain. Rucker swears he left the furnace-door open when we stopped at noon. When we found the front sheet of the boiler three or four hundred yards away in the woods, the door was shut and latched."

"That proves nothing," Tregarvon said.

"No; anything might happen to a door, or to anything else, in a hurry trip of that kind. On the other hand, it would have been a very easy matter for some one to have sneaked up on the farther side of the engine while we were eating. And Rucker insists that only the closed door could have accounted for the sudden rise in pressure which caused the explosion."

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"We'll never know," was Tregarvon's comment. "But why Hartridge should shield our obstacle-thrower at one time, and try to set us on to him at another, is beyond me."

Carfax smiled soberly. "Mr. William W. Hartridge appears to be a unique. I had the pleasure of meeting him again, socially, no longer ago than yesterday."

"You spent the Sunday at Highmount?"

"No; I did better than that. Wilmerding was down from Whitlow, and I found that he knows Judge Birrell familiarly and well. I took my courage in my hand, borrowed your beast of a car, and Wilmerding and I drove to Westwood House in the rain."

"So you have met Richardia's father?"

"I have; and a finer old citizen doesn't exist. That suspicion of yours that he may be inspiring the fight on us is all bosh. He isn't at all the kind of man to knife an enemy in the dark. He is a poem on the Old South, Vance; a whole heart-breaking epic. His manners would put a Chesterfield to shame; and you can see at once where Richardia gets her keen little mind. The judge was disposed to place me in the Parker class at first—quite naturally; I could see that plainly enough—that, and his prejudice against

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all things Northern. But I was there as the friend of his friend Wilmerding, and that settled it. A Bedouin chief couldn't have been more hospitable."

"You told him you were going to marry Richardia?"

"Oh, dear, no; you mustn't hurry things that way!" laughed the golden one. "You simply *can't* hurry them, you know, with a man like Judge Birrell. But I flatter myself that I made good in the try-out. Hartridge was there, with Miss Farron—though I can't imagine how they got over from Highmount in the rain—so there was quite a house-party of us. At dinner-time it was raining harder than ever, and the judge wouldn't hear to our going, though I had the top up on the car, and, of course, offered to take Hartridge and Miss Farron back to the college. So we all stayed to dinner. That dinner would have broken your heart, Vance."

"Why?"

"Because it showed in a thousand little ways what the family has been, and what it has now come to. The china was Sèvres, but much of it was chipped and broken, and hardly any two pieces were alike. The table-cloth had once been somebody's pride, but it had been laundered and

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darned until it was like a piece of old lace. The silver was evidently an heirloom, and it was so worn with much polishing that you could scarcely make out the engraving. We had chicken—I imagine nobody in the South ever gets so poor that he can't have chicken—but the luxuries were conspicuous by their absence. Do you know what I think, Vance? I believe that the Westwood House cash assets are measured exactly by the size of Richardia's Highmount salary."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Tregarvon, keenly sympathetic. "Richardia has given me to understand that there is a lot of mountain land, which is practically valueless now that the tan-bark timber has all been cut off; but there is nothing to bring an income."

"Wilmerding has told me something of the judge's involvement with the original Ocoee promoters, and the struggle he made to keep his name good after he and his friends had been frozen out," Carfax resumed. "He had recommended the scheme to a good many others, and when the smash came, he stripped himself bare to make good the losses of his friends, withholding nothing but a little money he had put aside for Richardia's musical education."

Tregarvon nodded. "That explains something

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that Richardia said to me one time when we were talking about people marrying and settling down; she said, in that perfectly straightforward way of hers, that she would like to marry, but that she was in debt, and couldn't marry until after she had earned enough money to pay herself out."

"She has said something of the same nature to me," Carfax admitted. "But it seems that there were other troubles besides the property losses. The judge had a son, a year or so older than Richardia. He was a school-boy at the time of the big smash, but was old enough, Wilmerding says, to be hot-headed and a bit wild and ungovernable. Parker, the promoter, was foolish enough to show up here again, after the *débâcle*; and this boy actually tried to kill him; emptied a pistol at him, winged him with one of the shots, and then ran away. He has never been heard from since."

"That is all new to me," Tregarvon commented. "I didn't know Richardia had a brother. She has never spoken of him to me."

"Wilmerding says nobody ever speaks of him," Carfax went on. "Parker was vindictive, and pushed the assault case. A grand jury found a true bill against young Birrell, and a warrant was issued for his arrest. He couldn't

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be found; has never been found. His son's disappearance, and the struggle to keep faith with his friends, made the judge what he is now, a proud, broken-spirited old hermit who is carrying the heaviest burden a father can bear—the disgrace of a son."

"Disgrace?" echoed Tregarvon. "It's hardly that, is it? Haven't we been taught that it is a part of the Southern code that a son should shoot his father's betrayer?"

"Oh, yes; that part of it was all right. The disgrace was in showing the white feather by running away; in not staying to face the consequences. As a matter of fact, I don't suppose there would have been any consequences. Any jury that could have been impanelled in this vicinity at that particular time would have acquitted the boy. The cowardly streak is what broke the judge's heart."

"This story of the boy opens up a bit of new ground," said Tregarvon musingly. "I wonder if Richardia doesn't know where he is? She has given me the impression, more than once, that she has a deep-buried trouble of some sort—a trouble that she never shares with anybody. Haven't you had the same notion?"

Carfax shook his head.

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"She doesn't need to go that far afield to find her troubles. The wrecked family fortunes, and a broken old man to shield and comfort and care for on a music teacher's wages, are enough to fill all the requirements, I should imagine."

"Surely. But as to the money hardship . . . you'll be able to change all that, Poitiers."

Carfax rose, knocked the ashes from his pipe, and slowly refilled it.

"You have come to see things in their right light, at last, have you?" he inquired at the end of the little interval of silence.

"Partly. There is only one light in which they can be seen. I had no shadow of right to fall in love with Richardia."

"Wait a minute," said Carfax in his gentlest tone. "Are you sure it was real? You know, you have had so many of these—er—these little erotic explosions in the past——"

"I know," was the humble admission. "But this was different. You may say that the difference lay in the fact that it was forbidden, and point me to the moral twist—as old as the race—that makes the forbidden thing figure as the one thing altogether desirable. Doubtless I have the twist, in common with other men: but the difference remains."

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"You have written to Elizabeth?"

"Yes; I wrote last night at the hotel in Chattanooga."

"I hope you said all you ought to say."

"I tried conscientiously to do just that, Poitiers. I'll confess now that I didn't begin to see how dastardly it would look when it was written out in black on white. But I didn't spare myself in the least."

"What kind of an answer do you expect?" Carfax had sat down again and his face was turned away.

"Honestly, I don't know. Every word that I have ever told you about the lack of sentiment between us is true: and yet . . . well, Elizabeth is a woman, after all, Poitiers. Even in a relationship as unsentimental as ours has been there are limitations—there must be limitations."

Carfax was gazing now into the heart of the dying fire.

"If the case were reversed, Vance, what would your answer be?"

Tregarvon gave a short laugh. "I can't imagine the reversal," he parried. "Elizabeth is one of those splendid, serene, *élevé* women who go through life without ever knowing the meaning of a grand passion."

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"Still, you haven't answered my question."

"I am not afraid to answer it. If Elizabeth had told me, even before I met Richardia, that she had— Oh, piffle! it's no use; I can't imagine it!"

For a long time Carfax said nothing. But when the final whiff had been drawn from the bedtime pipes, he ventured a small request.

"I've been butting in on your affairs so long that it has come to be a habit, Vance," he said, with his quaint smile. "When you hear from Elizabeth, will you tell me what she says?"

Tregarvon, who had been thinking of many things during the speechless interval, answered on the impulse of the moment.

"Of course; I'll let you read the letter, if you care to. Why shouldn't I? There's your candle on the mantel, when you want it. I'm going to bed."

XIX

The Human Equation

ON the Tuesday after Tregarvon's return to Coalville the arrival of the new equipment was the signal for a brisk renewal of the activities. Tregarvon had spent the day scouring the valley for men and teams, and by Wednesday morning he had a small army at his command. Many hands made light work, and by noon the machinery was unloaded, and all was ready for the beginning of the toilsome haul up the mountain.

"I suppose you know how you are going to do it," Carfax remarked, dallying over his luncheon in the office-building dining-room while Tregarvon was hastily bolting his meal as fast as Uncle William could serve it. "Where did you learn? The university didn't teach you, I'm sure."

"Experience," mumbled the working-man. "I learned the trade getting the other boiler and engine up the hill."

Carfax was apparently in a reflective mood.

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"This rough-and-tumble game down here is making a different man of you," he offered. "Don't you realize the change?"

"I've never been afraid of work, if that is what you mean."

"Yes, I know; but the kind of work that implies the wearing of corduroys and a flannel shirt, and builds horny lumps on the palms of your hands, and makes you talk to a mule in the only language a mule understands—I never used to dream it of you in the old days, Vance."

"I work for the same reason that other men do—because it's up to me. This would be a damned lazy world if necessity didn't crack the whip."

"There it is again," Carfax smiled; "you even let bits of the mule language come to the table with you. It runs in my mind that Elizabeth is going to have her hands full recivilizing you."

"Perhaps she won't care to. Quite likely she won't need to. If the Ocoee should turn out to be a real mine with a dividend attachment, it is altogether probable that I shall become again what I have been heretofore—an ornament to polite society and a wart on the body economic."

Carfax shook his head as one who refuses to be convinced.

"That will never happen in the wide, wide

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world, my dear Vance. We may go around, but we never go back. I have heard you spoken of, in times past, as a woman's man: you'll never be that again."

"That is the kindest thing you've said in a week," Tregarvon averred. Whereupon he bolted the final mouthful and left the prophet to his own devices.

Somewhat later, Carfax joined the working party—but only as an onlooker. The engine was mounted on heavy trucks, and a string of twelve mule-spans was inching it up the mountain pike to an accompaniment of cracking whips and much profanity. Tregarvon was in the thick of it, and the young purse-holder stood aside and tried to realize that this sweating, bullying gang boss and man-of-all-work was the light-hearted *flâneur* of whom his best friends had predicted nothing either very good or very bad, and certainly nothing strenuous. Carfax was given to nice weighings and measurings of the human atom, and he wondered if the roughing-out process owed anything to sentimental reactions. Disappointments are rude tonics to some natures, and defeat in one field may be the germ of victory in another. Being a good friend, he proceeded to administer an additional dose of the tonic, dragging Tregar-

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von aside while the mules were catching their breath.

"I like your nerve," he began, with the drawl more than usually pronounced. "You are taking up the entire road with your beastly contrivances. How am I going to get past all this clutter with the motor-car, I'd like to know?"

"That's your lookout," growled the man-of-all-work. "The road is mine while I'm using it."

"But I have an engagement," was the mild protest. "I'm to take Richardia out for a drive after three o'clock."

"Well, I can't help that, can I? You've got all the time there is for your courting, and then some. My job is to get this engine up the mountain."

Carfax chuckled softly. "In another minute or so you'll be mistaking me for one of the mules. I suppose I can take the other road, from Hesterville; but as likely as not it will make me late—it's such a long way around."

"Can't you send a note up by one of Tryon's boys explaining the situation?"

"Why, my dear Vance! Can it be possible that you are suggesting that I should break an engagement with a young lady?—you who just a few weeks ago would have broken your neck to——"

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"Cut it out," was the gruff interruption. "I'm busy now, and you are delaying the game. Tag along behind us when you are ready to drive up, and we'll make room for you if we can." Then to his farmer helpers: "Now, then—are you fellows going to let those mules rest all day? Push 'em into the collars and let's go somewhere! *Hi!* you fellows up ahead—straighten out those leaders!"

The cherubic smile was at its shining best when Carfax turned away and sauntered back toward the coke-ovens. Human atoms are among the most interesting things in the world, once the study of them has passed the elementary stages. Carfax, deep in the contemplation of the subject, had reached the ovens themselves before he saw two men coming toward him, stopping at each stoke-door to allow the taller of the two to go on his hands and knees to inspect the cavern-like interiors. Carfax recognized the shorter of the pair at once. It was Thaxter.

"Mr. Carfax, shake hands with Mr. Thirlwall, our consulting engineer—or rather, you'd better not, because his hands are dirty: Mr. Thirlwall, this is Mr. Poitiers Carfax, Mr. Tregarvon's friend and financial backer." Thus the book-keeper, when Carfax came up.

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Carfax acknowledged the introduction and shook hands with the tall man, in spite of the warning.

"Delighted," he murmured; "always delighted to meet any friend of Mr. Thaxter's. Tregarvon is up the road a bit, wrestling with a transportation problem. Shall I send for him?"

Thaxter negatived the suggestion at once. "It isn't at all necessary to take him away from his work," he protested genially. "Mr. Thirlwall was with us for the day, and we thought we would run down and have a look at your coking-plant. It's in rather bad repair, isn't it?"

Now what Carfax did not know about coking-plants would have filled volumes, but he was careful not to betray his ignorance.

"There are years of service in these old ovens yet," he asserted confidently. "Don't you think so, Mr. Thirlwall? But as to that, we should expect to put them in good repair if any one wished to buy them."

"Mr. Tregarvon is still in the mind to sell?" queried the round-faced bookkeeper.

"Candidly, Vance doesn't know his own mind from one day to another," said Carfax, parrying nimbly. "But I guess we are all that way, more or less; up one day and down the next."

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The tall engineer smiled because it seemed obvious that he was expected to. "You have been having some more bad luck up on the mountain, so Mr. Thaxter tells me," he put in. "It seems rather a pity that you and your friend won't take the word of those who know, and stop throwing good money away."

"It is a pity, isn't it?" Carfax concurred heartily. "But if we didn't spend money in this way, heaven only knows in what other foolish enterprise we might be investing."

"That is a new power-plant you are hauling up the hill?" the engineer inquired.

"Brand-new," boasted Tregarvon's proxy.

"The purchase doesn't look as if you were intending to stop throwing the money away," said Thirlwall.

"Oh, that is entirely as it may happen," Carfax countered cheerfully. "You know the bankrupt always puts up the best front he can when he finds himself coming to the jumping-off place."

"I hope you and Mr. Tregarvon are not trying to run a bluff on anything so unimpressible as Consolidated Coal," laughed Thaxter.

"Much obliged for the hint," returned the golden youth, accurately matching the book-keeper's laugh. "I give you my word, we hadn't

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thought of that. Would it astonish you beyond measure if we should?"

"Don't try it," the engineer advised. "We have excellent records of every acre of coal land in this region, with all the data; thickness of veins, their placement, and so on. You can't very well run a bluff when the other fellow knows every card in your hand, Mr. Carfax."

"That is so," Carfax yielded gracefully. "You people have the age on us, in both meanings of the word. Have you heard anything from New York, Mr. Thaxter?"

"Nothing positive, as yet; there has scarcely been time. But I believe Mr. Thirlwall has been asked to make a report on the present condition of the equipment."

The engineer confirmed the supposition with a nod, and Carfax said: "Tregarvon will be glad to show you everything he has, I'm sure. Will you make the inspection to-day?"

Thirlwall looked at his watch.

"I can hardly spare the time this afternoon," he demurred. "Besides, if I know anything about such things, Mr. Tregarvon wouldn't care to leave his machinery blocking a public road while he was showing us around."

Carfax had learned all he wished to know, and

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now he became urgently hospitable. Wouldn't the visitors stop and rest awhile in the office-building? True, there was little to offer in the way of refreshment, but the old negro cook could make a passable pot of tea. To all of this, Thaxter made excuses for both and said they must be driving back to Whitlow.

Carfax let them go, apparently with the greatest reluctance, walking with them to the post where Thaxter's horse was hitched. But after the natty side-bar buggy had disappeared over the small rise in the northward road, he smiled like an angelic understudy of the villain in a play.

"Not much, you didn't drive down here to tell us that our coke-ovens are out of repair, Mr. Thaxter!" he derided joyously, apostrophizing the vanished bookkeeper. "You came to see if it were really true that we had bought a new engine and were going on with the game! And you are jolly well welcome to all that you found out!"

At a little past two o'clock, Carfax, driving the yellow car, tailed in behind the machinery procession on the mountain road. Tregarvon had been having good luck and was correspondingly jubilant; but the sight of Carfax going to keep an appointment with Richardia Birrell gave him another set back.

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"That's right; go on and enjoy yourself," he grumbled sourly, as Carfax came up to edge his way past the obstructing raffle of teams and machinery. "If you knew how to chock a wheel or handle a pinch-bar, I'd pull you out of that joy wagon and set you at work. Since you don't, you'd better trundle along and get out of our way."

"I shall tell Miss Richardia that I left you in a heavenly temper," threatened the gentle mocker in the driving-seat.

"The less you say about me in that quarter, the better," was the surly rejoinder; and with that, Tregarvon began to shout again at his teamsters.

In due time Carfax negotiated his passage and the yellow car disappeared in the direction of Highmount. But the sting was left behind, and Tregarvon drank deep from the opium cup of fierce labor without being able to purchase blessed oblivion. Jagged thoughts came uppermost; repinings as old as mankind; as venerable, at least, as that prehistoric day when the first friend took it upon himself to smite his brother into the straight and narrow path.

Why must civilized man, alone of all sentient beings, be burdened with that inconsiderate thing

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called conscience? The bird of the air, the beast of the field, was free to choose its mate; the savage stood aside only when some bigger savage compelled him. Environment and the stress of the moment have shaping influences mighty in proportion to the strenuities. Tregarvon, fighting for the up-hill inches with a load a ton or so heavier than his pulling power, became immune to the gentler leadings. Why should a promise, made to a woman who had taken it serenely as a conventional matter of course, stand in the way of a passion so vital that it laid hold upon the very well-springs of life? Why should he stand aside and let Carfax, under a fantastic sense of duty, mar three lives, or possibly four, in a foolish attempt to preserve the conventional unities?

The materialistic afternoon had done its worst for Tregarvon by the time Tryon's boy, who had been stationed on ahead to give warning of the approach of descending teams, waved his hat as a signal that some one was driving down the mountain. The moment was inauspicious. A pulling-rope had just broken; the heavy load of machinery was stalled in a crooked bend in the road, and was for the time immovable. Tregarvon yelled out a string of orders to his helpers, and then went on past the tangle of mules and

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rope tackle to meet the descending vehicle. Being in the proper frame of mind, he swore crabbedly to the world at large when he saw that it was his own car, with Carfax at the wheel, Richardia in the mechanician's seat, and the tonneau thickly packed with young women from Highmount.

"You can't pass," was his curt denial of the right of way when Carfax slowed to a stop. "We have just broken a tackle, and everything is all balled up. Couldn't you find any other road to drive on?"

Carfax laughed and turned to his seat-mate. "You see how inhospitable he really is when he isn't parading his company manners." Then to the young women behind him: "Mr. Tregarvon won't let us drive down, but if you young ladies would care to see the wheels go round at a moment when, as it seems, they have just stopped going round, we can walk."

There was an instant chorus of walking votes, and Carfax got out to open the tonneau door. Tregarvon stood aside, scowling as any working-boss might when his difficulties are about to be made a raree-show for the frivolous. Miss Richardia slipped out of the mechanician's seat on her own side of the car, unassisted, but when the

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sight-seeing contingent marshalled itself for the descent into the tangle, she did not join it.

"You are not going with the others?" said Tregarvon ungraciously.

"There are enough of them for you to be spiteful at, without adding me to the number," she returned, adding: "Besides, I wanted to speak to you. It was I who asked Mr. Carfax to drive down here."

She had come around to his side of the car and he looked her squarely in the eyes.

"Be careful what you say to me to-day, Richardia: I am not the same man that I was a few days ago."

"*Boo!*" she said, with the little grimace that always set his blood afire; "you make me shivery when you look and talk that way. I came to try to help you—not to be frozen."

"Say it," he commanded.

"How can I, when you won't let me? I have a piece of news for you—something that I imagine you'd like to know. Have you written to Miss Wardwell lately?"

"Yes; Sunday night in Chattanooga."

"And this is Wednesday: have you had a reply?"

"No; not yet. What is your news?"

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"I was just wondering whether I'd better not keep it to myself, after all. Mr. Carfax said you were in a bad temper, but he didn't tell me that you were utterly impossible."

Tregarvon's scowl deepened.

"Impossible? Of course, I am impossible. What would you expect, in the circumstances?"

At this, she smiled up at him and said: "I'm beginning to be a little deaf now—charitably deaf."

"I don't need charity," he broke out hotly. "All I need is a chance to fight for my own hand. Tell me one thing: have you promised to marry Poitiers yet?"

"Have you any right to ask me such a question as that?"

"I have; the best right in the world: you know I have."

She met his half-angry, half-passionate gaze calmly.

"I know that you are about to make a shipwreck of your better self," she averred. Then: "Don't you know that there are some things that are hard for a woman to forgive—or, having forgiven them, to forget?"

"I am in no mood to split hairs with you to-day," he grated. "You are thinking of Eliza-

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beth: she knows already what she will have to forgive. I told her in the letter I wrote Sunday night."

She shook her head sorrowfully.

"You are tearing the anchors loose, one by one. Will nothing make you realize what you are doing?"

"What would you have me do? It has come to that, Richardia: I don't care for anything else. A little further along, you may be another man's wife, and I may be another woman's husband; but it will make no difference——"

"*Don't!*" she cried sharply; and then, before he could add another word, she had left him and was walking down the road to meet the tonneau party which was stringing along on its return to the car, with Carfax in the lead.

Tregarvon tramped moodily away when Carfax began to help his charges into the car, going back to the tangle which Tryon had finally contrived to straighten out. Taking over the command, he flung himself once more into the work, but the fine fire was gone, and when evening came and the machinery truck was left blocked at the roadside to wait for another day, he trudged back to Coalville at the tail of the mule cavalcade, sodden with weariness.

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Carfax had not returned when Uncle William served dinner, and Tregarvon ate alone, morosely thankful for the solitude. Afterward he went directly to his room on the second floor; and Carfax, coming in a little after nine o'clock, had no chance to tell him of Thaxter's visit and its probable object.

XX

Limitations

DAY following day in the conflict with steepness on the mountain road, Tregarvon toiled early and late, breakfasting before Carfax was visible, eating at midday out of a basket brought to the scene of the activities by Uncle William, and missing the golden youth two evenings in succession by reason of Carfax's continued popularity at Highmount.

Such sacrifices to the morose deities of materialism bring their own revenges. By the Friday evening, when the new engine and boiler had been dragged painfully up the final ascent and had been halted for the night at a point nearly opposite the college campus, Tregarvon had become a bitter man-driver and was facing the consequences in a strike on the part of his farmer helpers.

John Teppenpaw, a husky young Wehatcheean from the farther side of the valley who had brought four of the best-pulling beasts to the job, was the first to raise the standard of revolt.

"Ef you-all 'll thess pay me off, I reckon I won't come back no more," Teppenpaw announced,

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after he had thrown the trace-chains over the backs of his mules for the descent of the mountain.

"What's that?—what the devil is the matter with *you*?" Tregarvon snapped viciously. "Aren't you getting enough money?"

"Money ain't the onliest thing ther' is in this world," was the sullen retort. "I ain't allowin' to let no man hire me to take his cussin' and swearin' and browbeatin'. I got a li'l piece o' land and a few head o' stock o' my own, and I allow I don't *haf* to!"

"I reckon that's about the size of it f'r me, too," put in Jeff Daggett, who was Teppenpaw's nearest neighbor on the north; and from this the fire of resentment spread so rapidly that the strike became unanimous, passing at once beyond any hope of arbitration.

"You're quitting on me before the job's finished?" raged Tregarvon. "You are a lot of bally idiots! The money you are getting for this haul is more than any one of you will see from now to Christmas! Are you a pack of silly women that you can't stand a little man-sized talk from a boss?"

"That's jist hit," said Daggett. "Looks like you-all was used to rippin' and tearin' at them

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no-account furriners up No'th that ain't got nothin', and don't know enough to raise a terruction when you cuss 'em out. We-all ain't nuther niggers n'r furriners. I'll take my pay and quit."

Tregarvon became heavily sarcastic. "Is this your way of telling me that you want more money?"

Bickler, the oldest man in the squad, made answer.

"I reckon you-all ain't got money enough to make us-all come back f'r another day like what this'n has been, Mr. Tregarvon. You've got a heap to l'arn ef ye allow to stay down yere in old Tennessee and get white men to work f'r ye."

"Quit, then, and be damned to you!" Tregarvon exploded. "Show up at the office in Coalville to-morrow morning before I leave, and you'll get your pay. I don't carry your money around with me in my pocket."

To a clattering of hoofs and a jingling of trace-chains the cavalcade moved off down the pike, leaving the deserted boss standing beside the stranded machinery truck. Tregarvon knew very well that by another day the story of the strike and its cause would be passed from lip to ear throughout the length and breadth of the We-hatchee, and there would be no hope of recruiting

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another gang among the farmers. The half-mile of sandy wood road still remained to be traversed, and without the teams the load could be moved only by means of a block and tackle and winch, manned by Tryon's gang of track laborers; a process which would add other exasperating days of delay.

The dusk was thickening under the trees when the discouraged hauling-boss took his coat from the truck and struggled into it preparatory to setting out upon the long tramp down the mountain. He had seen nothing of Carfax since an hour before noon, when the yellow car had edged past the road obstructions on its way up the pike. But now he heard the purring of a motor and waited.

The car was coming down the cross-mountain road, and Tregarvon could see that there were two persons in it. Instead of turning in at the campus gates, it came on, and Carfax braked it to a stop opposite the loaded truck. "Is that you, Vance?" he called to the figure standing in the shadow of the pines.

"Yes." Tregarvon stepped out of the shadows and crossed to the automobile, though the nearer approach was not needed to assure him that Carfax's companion was Richardia Birrell.

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"You are coming along beautifully!" Carfax praised, speaking as one who holds himself delicately aloof from the toilsome details. "It's great to be a working-man and able to do things. One day more will take you over to the drilling ground, won't it?"

"Half a day was all I asked, with the men and teams; but I am not going to have it. They have quit on me."

"A strike? What was the trouble? Weren't you paying them enough?"

"It wasn't a question of more money. They seemed to think that I ought to speak softly and say 'mister' and 'please' when I wanted them to get a move."

Carfax laughed and turned to his companion in the other half of the driving-seat.

"He puts it rather—er—diplomatically, don't you think?" he confided to the young woman. "Really, you know, his language has come to be something frightful!" Then to the diplomat: "What are you going to do?"

Tregarvon ignored Carfax's companion, and the derisive confidence to which she had made no reply. "If I had the nerve, I suppose I might kill another week dragging the thing through the wood by half-inches with a block and tackle and man-power," he offered.

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"Dear me! And in the meantime the enemy—whoever he is—will be storing up ammunition and getting ready to efface you once more."

Tregarvon turned away.

"I don't believe I shall give 'the enemy' another chance at me. Will you be down to dinner?"

"Oh, hold on; don't go off in a huff that way!" Carfax protested in mock concern. "We have had our little joy-ride, and I was just taking Miss Richardia home. Wait a minute and tell us how you are going to block 'the enemy's' game."

Tregarvon was still ignoring Miss Birrell.

"Thaxter sent me a note this morning. Consolidated Coal is ready to do business with us."

"With you, you mean; I am only a good-natured bystander. What does Mr. Thaxter say?"

For the first time in the brisk exchange of question and answer, Tregarvon took the silent member of the trio into consideration.

"All this doesn't interest Miss Richardia. I can talk the business matter over with you later on."

If the music teacher had been keeping a vow of silence she broke it now with a little laugh.

"I am interested," she assured him; adding: "I hope you feel better, now that you have made me say it in so many words."

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Tregarvon let the small gibe go without retort.

"The offer of a hundred thousand for the Ocoee properties has been renewed in my behalf, Thaxter tells me; but if I wish to avail myself of it, I must accept immediately."

"What is the keen rush?" Carfax inquired.

"It is explained reasonably enough. The C. C. & I. people are preparing to open other veins on their Whitlow lands to the north of the present mine. These plans are being held up, pending my decision. If I sell out to them, they will probably abandon these plans for the present; opening, instead, the south vein—the one Thaxter told us about—and using our tramway and coke-ovens."

Carfax seemed to have grown suddenly reflective. "It rather puts you between two fires, doesn't it?" he commented. "You don't wish to lose your chance to sell, and you don't wish to sell before you have seen what that unfinished hole over yonder may be going to show you. And if you take time to drag this power-plant over by hand, the golden opportunity will get by. The question which suggests itself to me is a very foolish one, no doubt. I'm asking myself how much the C. C. & I. people paid your farmers to induce them to lie down on you."

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Tregarvon's laugh was brittle. "You needn't go that far. I'll be frank enough to admit that I gave Daggett and his men plenty of provocation for the strike."

"In other words, you've been handing them some of the mule talk. Shocking! But that is spilt milk and it can't be gathered up now. What is Thaxter's time limit?"

"He says in his note that he will expect to hear from me by Saturday, at the latest. That is to-morrow."

At this, Miss Richardia spoke up quickly:

"Does 'to-morrow' mean all day to-morrow? Or does it mean to-morrow morning?"

"Oh, I should suppose I might take the day for it. Any option holds good up to midnight of its day of expiration, unless there is some proviso to the contrary."

"And how long would it take you to do all these things that Mr. Carfax says you would like to do first—before deciding?"

"Only a few hours, if the men and teams had stayed with me. But as it is, it would probably take a week."

There was silence for a moment and then Carfax said: "Miss Richardia is trying to tell you to postpone your decision as long as you can, only

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she can't find the words. That is my advice, too. One can never tell what a day may bring forth. Wait a minute until I can drive back to the college, and then I'll take you down the hill."

Tregarvon stood aside while Carfax turned the car and sent it swiftly up to and through the Highmount gateway. A few minutes later the golden youth came sauntering back, alone and afoot.

"That blessed motor of yours has gone dippy again," he announced coolly, as if the yellow car had lately been acquiring bad habits. "It pegged out just as I drove up to the Caswell door. I suppose I shall have to send a boy over to our shack after Rucker. Mrs. Caswell rises to the occasion and invites us both to dinner while we wait. What do you say?"

"Not on your life!" Tregarvon refused sourly. "I'm not fit company for anybody to-night. I'll walk down."

"All right: then I'll stay and bring the car after Rucker has rejuvenated it. You needn't sit up for me. And, by the way, that reminds me. There were some letters for you last night—Tait brought them over after you had gone to bed. Did you find them?"

"Yes; I got them this morning."

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"Anything from—er—from Elizabeth yet?"

"Not yet; no."

Carfax hesitated a moment and then interested himself sympathetically—or seemed to. "I hope you didn't say too much—or too little—in that confession of yours last Sunday night, Vance; in the letter you sent from Chattanooga."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I suppose I am, as you might say—er—well, I'm a sort of an accessory before the fact, don't you think? I can't forget that it was I who clubbed you into the proper frame of mind."

"You needn't worry; you're safely out of it," declared the confessor, with a laugh which was only half good-natured. "I gave you your just due: told her that I owed you my soul's salvation; which you had safely clinched against any backsliding by asking Richardia to marry you."

For a moment there was a silence like that which precedes the crash of summer thunder. Then, in a still, small voice, Carfax said: "You told her that, did you? You gave her to understand that, right off the bat, and merely in passing, as it were, I had carelessly determined to marry your temptation out of your way? There was only one mistake made in your education,

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Vance; the person who first taught you to put pen to paper ought to have been instantly hanged, drawn and quartered. I—I—" but here, apparently, speech failed him, and he turned abruptly to walk rapidly away toward Highmount, leaving Tregarvon standing, half-remorseful and wholly bewildered, in the middle of the road.

The bewilderment went with the too highly educated one a good part of the way down to Coalville, and it certainly would have been increased if he could have known that, five minutes after he had turned the first curve in the winding pike below Highmount, the car which had been so lately reported out of commission had been mysteriously restored to a state of usefulness; that, with a man and a woman in the driving-seat, it had whisked through the campus portal, cut a perilous quarter-circle at speed in the piked roadway, and had vanished in a thick cloud of limestone dust to the westward, leaving Mrs. Caswell's dinner to wait for its return.

XXI

The Clansmen

TREGARVON turned out early in the morning of a Saturday, to be known afterward as a day of fateful happenings, largely from force of habit—since there was no mule cavalcade to be led to the Pisgah heights. As on the three previous mornings, he breakfasted alone. In reply to his inquiry, Uncle William told him that the motor-car was not in its shed, and the inference was that Carfax had spent the night as the guest of the Caswells.

“Summa dem po’ white men out yondeh on de po’ch a-waitin’ faw you-all, Mistoo Tregarbin,” the old negro announced, after the solitary meal was despatched. “Look lak dey’s mighty grump-tious erbout somepin, dey does.”

Tregarvon went to the front of the building, where he had established a rude excuse for an office, and opened the door. The farmers were there, waiting for their pay, and the settlement was made without waste of words on either side. But after the money had been handed out, Dag-

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gett was moved to make peaceful overtures, natural kindliness having gotten the better of resentment. They—the farmers—had been talking it over among themselves, and Daggett “allowed” that they might have been hasty. Without prejudice to the fact that they objected to being sworn at, they would come back Monday or Tuesday of the following week and finish the hauling job, if the boss so desired.

At this, as was most natural after a night of worry and disappointment, Tregarvon’s temper flew into shards.

“Not in a hundred years, you won’t!” he exploded wrathfully. “If I can’t move that machinery without your help, it may stand right where it is until it rots! You’ve got your money, and I’ve learned my lesson. We’re quits.” And with that he shouldered his way through the group and went to rally Tryon and the track gang, marshalling the handful of laborers for the ascent of the mountain in the tram-car.

Some half-hour beyond this, the handful having taken a short cut through the summit forest from the tramhead, Tregarvon found a sharp surprise awaiting him at the point on the pike where the truck load had been halted for the night. Scattered along the road or drawn up under the

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trees were a dozen or more teams of all sorts and descriptions—raw-boned mules in mismatched pairs, spans in which an ancient horse was harnessed with a mule or with another horse to the full as venerable, animals with back-bones like ridge-poles, others posturing as the halt, the lame, and the blind, and, completing the makeshifts, a wagon drawn by a pair of diminutive bulls. The drivers of this new levy were harmoniously in keeping with their outworn stock, decrepit wagons, and rope-patched harnesses; lank, sallow-faced mountain men of the McNabb type, with a toothless patriarch of the McNabb name to act as their spokesman.

"We-uns done heerd you-uns wuz a-needin' help fer to pull thish-yer load thoo the woods," said the aged spokesman, shrilling in a high, cracked voice at Tregarvon. "Me an' th' boys 'lowed we'd drap erlong an' gin ye a h'ist. How-all does ye hitch on ter that thar kintraption?" with a thumb-jerk over his shoulder toward the loaded truck.

Tregarvon recovered from his surprise in a rebound of heartfelt thankfulness. Here was manna from the skies, indeed. He asked no questions; made no ungrateful effort to pry into the whys and wherefores of the miracle. It was enough

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that the gods had relented. Treading softly among the adjectives, he proceeded to set his curiously assorted helpers, man and beast, in order, and the advance was begun.

Oddly enough, the task ran smoothly, despite the makeshift pulling beasts and the prodigious inexperience of the drivers with any load so formidable as the engine-mounted truck. To offset the inexperience, there was a quiet and resolute willingness that was heart-warming after the exacerbating sullenness of the valley farmers. Tregarvon found that his normal good-nature had not been slain; it had only been pushed aside; discovered also that hard words may make hard work. Turning the new leaf handsomely, he let the agile old patriarch do the bossing, and thus, rod by rod, the sandy half-mile was traversed and the goal in the old burying-ground was reached.

Just before noon, when the truck load had been pushed and pulled and inched into place in the glade, Carfax turned up, walking across from the school. His congratulations were profuse, but if he knew anything about the manner of the miracle-working, he betrayed neither himself nor the secret.

"I was certain you'd find a way out of the

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strike trouble," he asserted blandly. "I told the folks at the dinner-table last evening that I had never seen you knocked out so completely that you were obliged to take the count. How did you do it?"

Tregarvon shook his head. "I didn't do it; it was done for me. When I came up this morning with Tryon and the trackmen, the teams were ready and waiting. Somebody had rounded them up for me during the night. I have been charging it to you."

Carfax's laugh was a sufficient negation of the charge. "Do I look it?" he demanded. "If I do, I can prove an *alibi*. I spent a very pleasant evening with the Caswells and a bunch of the senior girls, and I am reasonably sure that I didn't walk in my sleep afterward."

"Did Richardia go home for the week-end, as usual?"

"She did; though she stayed and took dinner with us at Highmount. I drove her over to Westwood House in the car, later."

"So the car is all right again, is it?"

"Oh, yes; there wasn't much the matter with it."

Tryon had taken over the bossing of the gang, with Rucker for his able second, and Tregarvon

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was free to stand aside and talk with Carfax about the miracle.

"You say Richardia went home after dinner?" he queried. Then: "I can't help thinking that this is her doing. These men are all mountaineers."

Carfax's chuckle was frankly derisive. "That is mere sentiment on your part; the wish the father to the thought. You'd rather like to feel that you are indebted to her, wouldn't you? But I shall have to spoil that little day-dream. She was with the rest of us at Highmount until after ten o'clock, and it must have been nearly eleven when I drove her over to Westwood House—much too late to begin any campaign of team-raising for you."

Tregarvon took this apparent evidence of Miss Richardia's non-complicity at its face value, but he was still shaking his head dubiously.

"I can't understand it, Poitiers. These McNabbs and their cousins might very properly have it in for me on the old score of the land lawsuit; and, as you know, we have been suspecting them, more or less, all along. But now they turn out to give me a lift, just as I am about to lose my grip. What's the answer?"

Carfax's grin was as nearly impish as his che-

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rubic semblance would permit. "Call it an attack of conscience," he suggested playfully. "The other night we decided that it was one of the McNabbs who put the dynamite into the old boiler. Perhaps they have all had a change of heart, and this is their way of showing it. Will you be ready to go on drilling this afternoon?"

"I am afraid not. We shall have the machinery unloaded in another hour or so, and I can let these outsiders go home. But it will take the remainder of the day to get the engine in working order, so Rucker says."

"How about the C. C. & I. buying offer? The option expires with to-day, doesn't it?"

Tregarvon turned quickly upon the questioner.

"Do you advise me to take the offer, Poictiers? You will remember that after our talk with Hart-ridge a week ago you said I was not to sell."

"I know; but only idiots and corpses are unable to change their minds. You owe it to your people at home not to fall between two stools. After all is said, a sure hundred thousand is better than nothing."

"Hartridge has been working on you again," said Tregarvon accusingly. "And this time he has taken the other tack. Isn't that so?"

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Carfax neither admitted nor denied a later talk with the schoolmaster: "He asserts positively that you will find the two thin veins again here, with the rock between. He ought to know."

Tregarvon was silenced for the moment. Then he broke out impatiently.

"I've got to know for myself, Poictiers. If I don't stay with it long enough to prove up, I shall be a quitter. I'm all the other things you have occasionally called me, but not that!"

"No; I know you are not. I was just thinking: if you could meet Thaxter and talk with him? Possibly you could get the option time extended for a few days. You have a good reason for asking—apart from the real one, which is to find out what this drill-hole is going to say to you. You might urge that you'd like to have time to communicate with your lawyers. Suppose we drive up to Whitlow this afternoon?"

"We'll see," Tregarvon conceded. "It is barely possible that we shall get the drill in operation again to-day, and in that case I shall know definitely what to do. Do you lunch at Highmount?"

"I do," laughed the golden youth. "The Caswells have adopted me, and I shall get square with them a little further along by financing the new

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gymnasium. How about paying this miracle gang? Have you money enough with you?"

"I haven't, and I was going to ask if you would drive down to the office and break into the safe for me."

"I can do better than that," said the money-finder, producing a thick roll of bank-notes. "Money is the one thing I'm rotten with. I must go back and report for luncheon now, but I'll be over again later on, and we can decide about the trip to Whitlow."

A short time after Carfax's departure, Tregarvon paid the mountaineers and let them go. Singularly enough, some of the volunteers did not wish to take money and had to be persuaded. The sums named were ridiculously small, and in each instance Tregarvon gave more than was asked, putting the larger wage on the ground of the value of the service to him.

In the settlement the beneficiary of the miracle made an attempt to find out to whom the timely help was owing, but the effort spent itself against a dead wall of mountaineer reticence—or unknowledge. The McNabb patriarch had "heerd" of the trouble with the valley farmers through "ol' man Kent"; Kent had got the word from somebody else; and so it went, with the first cause

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either unknown or carefully concealed. Tregarvon did not press too curiously for the explanation. It was too much like inquiring the age of the proverbial gift-horse.

After the noon halt, with the glade cleared of the men and teams, the work of installation was begun. For a time it progressed handsomely. Rucker and Tryon were both competent foremen, and by three o'clock they had the engine and boiler shifted from the truck to its place behind the drill derrick, with only the steam-pipe connections remaining to be made.

Carfax had not yet returned, and Tregarvon began to wonder if he had forgotten the proposed Whitlow expedition. By this time it seemed altogether probable that the drilling could be resumed within an hour or two, and the mining gambler's passion to stay in the game until the last card had been turned fought against cool-headed prudence for first place in the struggle Tregarvon was making to decide as to what he should do.

If he should leave the mountain before the drilling began, the uncertainties would still be unresolved. On the other hand, if Consolidated Coal meant to hold him rigidly to the terms of the option, it became crucially necessary that he

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should know in advance what this final drilling-test was going to prove. If it should prove only another failure, the opportunity to sell must not be allowed to lapse. But if the test should prove that he had at last discovered the workable mother-vein . . . Tregarvon gasped at the golden possibility, and the offer of a paltry tenth of a million shrank to nothing.

He was wishing, for the hundredth time, that Carfax would come and help him to decide, when a buggy drawn by a high-stepping black horse appeared among the trees on the opposite side of the glade. Tregarvon recognized the equipage at once. It was Thaxter's, and the round-bodied bookkeeper was alone. The victim of indecision pulled himself together quickly. Chance, or the kindlier gods, had given him his opportunity, and he meant to improve it.

Thaxter came across to the tool shanty with the Cheeryble smile in commission.

"Still spending your good money on the kite-flying, are you?" he said, with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder at the new power-plant. "I don't know as I can blame you so very much: I was young and enthusiastic once, myself. You've worked wonders getting that thing up the mountain in such a short time. Somebody

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told me you were hung up with a strike, or something of the sort, and as it was our Saturday half-holiday, I thought I'd drive up and condole with you."

Tregarvon offered the bookkeeper a seat on the shanty step, saying: "We were hung up, temporarily, but we are getting into shape now."

"So I see," returned the jovial little man; and for a space the talk ran upon the difficulties of mountain installations and the drawbacks of having to depend upon picked-up labor in a region where labor was scarce. After a time, Thaxter broached the option matter of his own accord.

"You got my note the other day, I presume?"

"Promptly," Tregarvon acknowledged. "I was planning to go to Whitlow this afternoon."

"And you changed your mind?"

"I have changed it now, since you have been good enough to drive up. I suppose we can talk here as well as in your office. I have been considering the offer to purchase, and on some accounts it is rather attractive. We all like to bet on a sure thing when we can."

The genial go-between chuckled sagely. "And, on the other hand, we all like to bet upon the possibilities, now and then," he thrust in. "If you only had any possibilities——"

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Tregarvon made haste to fight away from that phase of the situation.

"We'll disregard the possibilities, which I may believe in, and you don't, Mr. Thaxter. This new power outfit was bought before I had your letter, and since we had it, we could hardly do less than to go on and install it. Let that part of it go, and we'll attack the business affair. As I say, I have been considering Consolidated Coal's offer to buy me out. Since you are buying nothing but the equipment, the offer is fair enough. But my father's estate is concerned, and the option is too short. In common prudence, I ought to consult my lawyers, and there hasn't been time."

The small man shook his head regretfully.

"These matters are all decided for us by the big fellows in New York," he explained. "In my letter I gave you the reasons why they have put the hurry speed on in this particular instance. It is really a very small detail to Consolidated Coal whether it buys you out or doesn't buy you out—merely a pen-scratch in the day's work. Of course, you know that, as well as I do."

"Yes," Tregarvon admitted. "But in spite of that, I am going to ask you to take it up with the powers again, suggesting that they give me a

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little more time. A few days, more or less, can make no difference."

This time the bookkeeper shook his head more firmly.

"I should be risking my poor little job, Mr. Tregarvon. I am only the humblest of understrappers in the big corporation, and if I should try to pull strings for you, some nippy chief clerk in the New York offices would tell me to pack my grip and get out."

"Then supposing you turn the papers over to me and let me do my own bargaining with headquarters," Tregarvon ventured.

"It wouldn't do a particle of good, as you'd know if you had had any dealings with the great corporations. These things are mere matters of routine, and you couldn't break that routine with a sledge-hammer, Mr. Tregarvon. I'm awfully sorry, but I am afraid the option will have to stand as it was made—to expire at midnight tonight."

Tregarvon had one small shot in reserve and the time had arrived when it must be fired.

"In that view of the case, Mr. Thaxter, I am afraid I shall have to stay out," he said, hoping against hope that the shot might find its target.

Once more Thaxter made the sign of regretful

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negation. From where he was sitting the book-keeper had a fair view of the installation activities, and Tregarvon could not help wondering if their rapid progress toward completion had anything to do with Thaxter's immovability. While he was waiting for the bluffing shot to penetrate, if it would, Rucker came across from the new engine, carrying a piece of iron pipe with a valve attached; carrying, also, a ferocious scowl to emphasize his complaint.

"Them machinery guys over in Chattanooga is a fright!" he rapped out. "That boiler dome is tapped for inch-and-a-quarter pipe, and so's the engine; and they've gone and sent us this inch-and-a-half throttle and pipe connection! Wot t' 'ell am I goin' to do about that, I'd like to know?"

Tregarvon grasped the new obstacle—and his own fierce impatience—firmly by the neck and refused to make a profane show of himself for Thaxter's benefit.

"I suppose there is only one thing to do, Billy; to go down to the railroad office and wire the machinery people to make good," he answered placably. Then to Thaxter: "We have hit so many of these knock-outs that we are beginning to learn that we must take them as they come."

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And with that, he scribbled a telegram on a leaf of his note-book, tore it out, and gave it to Rucker.

"There is the message," he said. "Tell Tryon and the men that the jig is up for to-day, and that I'll be down a little later on to pay them off. You'd better go down yourself and send that wire. If you can persuade the railroad agent to hustle it, we may catch the machinery shop before it closes."

Thaxter sat quite silent during the dispersal of the working gang; did not speak again until after the last of the men had disappeared in the direction of the tramhead. Then he said: "Well, you are hung up until next week safely enough now. Your wire won't get an answer this late Saturday afternoon."

"No, I suppose not," Tregarvon agreed. "The order will be filled Monday, and the new throttle will get here Tuesday or Wednesday or Thursday, at the pleasure of the railroad people. Cheerful layout, isn't it?"

"You certainly have bad luck enough to discourage most young men," said the bookkeeper, as one who would not withhold sympathy where sympathy is due. "Do you know, it simply grinds me to be the one to add my bit to the

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aggregation. I've half a mind to take a chance on the thunder and lightning and ask New York for that extension of time for you. You might reasonably hope to hear from your Philadelphia attorneys by Monday or Tuesday, don't you think?"

Tregarvon snatched at the concession avidly. "I'll wire them to-night," he promised, as if his decision depended entirely upon the result of the long-range consultation. But after Thaxter had driven away, excusing his haste on the plea that no time must be lost in reaching a telegraph office, Tregarvon wondered again; this time half-suspiciously. Why had Thaxter changed his tune so suddenly? Was it because he had just been given ocular proof that the test-drilling was again postponed? The more Tregarvon thought of it, the more plausible the assumption grew; and he was almost ready to call it a fact when, an hour later, Carfax put in an appearance with the motor-car.

In a few words Tregarvon told the story of the afternoon's happenings, giving the suspicion due standing.

"It is only a guess, as usual," he offered in conclusion. "But, in any event, the strain is off for the present. Thaxter will get the extension, and

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in the meantime we can take our chance to draw a comfortable breath or two. After Rucker comes back, we'll go down the hill and get ready to enjoy an old-fashioned restful Sunday. I don't mind confessing that the strain has been getting next to me, Poictiers. I'm going to push the whole wretched tangle into the background, for one day, at least, and try to catch up with my nerve."

"Good medicine!" laughed the one who had no nerves; and Rucker returning a few minutes later to resume his duties as resident watchman, they climbed into the yellow car and Tregarvon took the wheel to drive to the valley.

XXII

Out of a Clear Sky

THE event of the day for Coalville—the arrival of the afternoon passenger-train from Chattanooga—was in the near prospect when the yellow car rolled down the last of the grades and swept a wide circle around the coke-ovens and past the unloading platforms.

The train-time signs were always unmistakable. A little while before the hour, and always as if warned by some signal inaudible to alien ears, the loungers under Tait's porch rose, shook their legs to settle wrinkled trousers, and filed slowly over to the railroad station. Tregarvon's motor-car, no longer a nine days' wonder to the army of leisure, was slowing to cross the rails of the Ocoee siding when the station agent ran out of his office to wave the motorists down with a telegram. The message was for Carfax, and the agent explained that it had been delayed in transmission by some trouble with the wire on the branch line.

While Carfax was opening the envelope, Tre-

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garvon got out and went around to see if the brakes had been running cool in the swift drop from the summit of Pisgah. For this cause he did not hear Carfax's, "Ye gods and little fishes!" basing itself upon a glance at the delayed telegram.

"Vance!" he called, turning in his place to see what had become of Tregarvon. But Tregarvon did not hear. A canopy-topped surrey, venerable with age and drawn by a great-boned horse of dapple gray, was turning out of the Hesterville road to cross the tracks to the station. Miss Richardia Birrell was holding the reins over the dapple gray, and in the seat beside her was an old man, erect, white-haired, handsome as an ancestral portrait.

"Jehu!" said Tregarvon under his breath. "So that is her father. If looks count for anything, he is worthy of her; which is more than I would say for any other Tennessean I've met." Then Carfax's anxious call was repeated, and this time Tregarvon answered.

"Not lost—only mislaid," he returned. Then he saw Carfax's face: "Why, Poictiers!—who is dead?"

Carfax was standing up in his place, clinging to the steering-wheel with one hand and waving the telegram like a flag of distress in the other.

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"Read that!" he commanded tragically, when the inspector of brakes came within passing reach.

Tregarvon glanced at the message and became, in his turn, a man stricken down without warning. The bolt was dated at Chattanooga, and it had been filed for sending at nine in the forenoon. It was addressed to Carfax, and it read:

"Here with papa and mamma, and the Pennsylvania battle-monument dedicators. If I should run over to Coalville with Clotilde this afternoon, will you and Vance put me up at the hotel and show me your mine? But, of course, you will.

"ELIZABETH."

"Oh, good heavens!" groaned Tregarvon, when the paralyzing effect of the announcement gave place to the panic of dismay; "E-Elizabeth and her maid?—coming here?"

Carfax laughed rather wildly. "Yes; coming here to stop at—at the hotel!"

Tregarvon read the message again. "She says 'this afternoon.' That means to-day—now—this minute; she's on this train! Poitiers, if you are any friend of mine, you'll climb down here and find a club and put me out of my misery!"

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Carfax stopped laughing suddenly and sprang out of the car. "It's no joke!" he snapped. "It's up to us, you wild ass of the desert—do you hear? Stop your braying and listen to me: we've got to meet her over there on that platform just as if we had been watching every train for a week! There is the whistle: come along and invent your fairy-tale on the run!"

They did not crowd too eagerly to the front when the three-car train drew up to the platform. There were terms to be agreed upon; things which might be said, and things which must not be said. Thus it happened that an exceedingly handsome young woman, in a modish travelling hat and a brown coat, and followed by a French maid bearing impedimenta, was helped from the car-step by the brakeman.

"Charge!" Carfax commanded, in a hoarse whisper; but before they could do it, Miss Richardia slipped through the ranks of the platform loungers, put her arms quickly about the handsome young woman and kissed her, with an "Oh, you dear thing!" to go with the affectionate welcome.

Tregarvon saw, gasped, swallowed hard, and the smile of greeting which he had called up for the emergency turned into a shocked grin.

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"Get out in the road there and chunk me!" he whispered to Carfax. And then: "Poitiers, I'm a ruined man! They were together in the Boston music factory. Elizabeth has told me a hundred times how she chummed with a charming little Southerner—without naming any names! And I've been writing her—oh, I tell you, I'm a dead man. All you have to do now is to get a wreath to lay on my coffin!"

"You'll be needing the coffin if you don't buck up and catch the step!" hissed Carfax. Where-with he dragged his companion masterfully into the circle of welcomings.

The golden youth neither gave nor received the kiss of greeting; and he pointedly looked another way when Miss Wardwell offered her cheek for Tregarvon's cousinly salute. Then he found himself shaking hands with Richardia's father; realized vaguely that the judge was taxing him reproachfully for not having consented to occupy one of the many bed-rooms at Westwood House the night before, instead of returning to Highmount; realized also that Miss Wardwell was rallying Tregarvon gayly upon his discomfiture accomplished by means of the jesting telegram.

"Surely, it didn't mislead you, too, did it, Poitiers?" she questioned, turning to Tregar-

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von's accomplice. "Vance is trying to tell me that you took it harder than he did." Then she explained to Judge Birrell: "I sent a wire to these two from Chattanooga, you know, asking them if they could put me and Clotilde up at the Coalville hotel—by the way, Cousin Vance, where is the hotel?" Then again to the judge: "You see, I guessed, from what Richardia said in her last letter, that they didn't know I was invited to Westwood House. Fancy it! they got the telegram only a few minutes ago!"

Tregarvon backed out of the group and fanned himself with his hat. There were still traces of the shocked grin to temper the mask of feverish anxiety which was slowly displacing it. Everything he had ever written to Elizabeth about Richardia—everything he had ever told Richardia about Elizabeth—clamored for instant recollection and revision in the light of the unnerving fact that the two of them were here on the Coalville platform, together, as friends of long standing.

The train had moved on, the loungers were dispersing, and Miss Birrell was leading the way to the venerable surrey.

"Mr. Carfax has promised me that he will drive you up to Westwood House to-morrow. I



“Poictiers, I’m a ruined man!”

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Out of a Clear Sky

think you will be very sure to come, now," she said, after Tregarvon had flogged himself into some livelier sense of the requirements of the moment. Then she added: "You may come as early as you please."

"I think I shall be very ill to-morrow," he returned gravely, as he handed her into the carriage. "These sudden shocks are very bad—for the heart." Then, while Carfax was helping Miss Wardwell to the front seat with the judge: "I didn't believe you could be so wicked!"

"I am not the wicked one," was the quick retort. "I tried to tell you last Wednesday; that was why I asked Mr. Carfax to drive down to where you were working. But you wouldn't let me."

"If I am not too ill to come, you must let me see you first, before I—" Tregarvon was beginning; but Miss Richardia was not willing to be dragged even into the vicinity of things confidential.

"Hear him!" she said to Miss Wardwell; "Mr. Tregarvon is intimating that we have made him ill, between us!" Then she spoke to her father: "Judge Birrell, you will please command these two young gentlemen to report to you to-morrow at Westwood House—do you hear?"

The judge gave the invitation in due and

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courteous form, and Carfax accepted promptly for himself and for Tregarvon. After which the big dapple gray, mildly urged by his master, began to jog up and down and the age-worn surrey crept out of sight around the barrier rank of coke-ovens.

"We might have offered to take them up in the motor," said Carfax, when the afterthought had been given time to come to the surface.

"*You* might have," Tregarvon returned moodily. "I wouldn't trust myself to drive a wheelbarrow in the present state of things."

Carfax was about to swing himself behind the wheel to drive the car over to its shed and he paused with a foot on the running-board.

"When it comes to wrestling with the fateful tangles, you haven't so much the best of me as you may think you have—thanks to your little gift of letter-writing," he remarked darkly.

Tregarvon walked across to the office-building while Carfax was housing the car, went to his room, and was visible no more until Uncle William called him to dinner. At table he ate like an ogre—a sure sign of disturbment—and refused to rise to any of the small conversational baits flung out by Carfax. But afterward, over the tobacco-jar, there were things to be said and he said them.

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"Poitiers, I believe I'll write my will to-night and let you witness it," he began. "The easiest thing for me to do now is to go and offer myself to the chief of the bureau of tests as a candidate for the poison squad."

"Meaning that Elizabeth is here to answer your letter in person?" queried Carfax. "There is nothing so very deadly about that, is there?"

"That remark shows how little you know women. I was perfectly frank with Elizabeth, as I told you, but of course I didn't write as I should have written if I had known that she and Richardia were bosom friends. Now they will proceed to exchange confidences and compare notes—if they haven't already done both in their letters to each other. And what the comparison will leave of me won't be fit to fling to a starved puppy."

Carfax smoked in silence for quite some time before he said: "How they may stick pins into you, to your face or behind your back, seems a very inconsiderable factor in the case to me, Vance. The deadly part of it is that you are still in love—or you think you are—with Richardia Birrell, while you are going to marry Elizabeth Wardwell."

"No," Tregarvon objected, staring gloomily

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into the fire; "that isn't the worst of it. There is a still deeper depth: I can't help being the one or doing the other."

Carfax began to show signs of becoming restive.

"If Elizabeth only didn't care so much for you . . ." Then he took a new tack. "You didn't tell her all you ought to have told her in that letter, Vance; if you had, you wouldn't be dreading the actual show-down as you are now. Which means that you still have it to do."

"That is it, exactly," said the dejected one. "And I'd much rather be shot full of holes."

Carfax took another dose of his own prescription of silence. Then he said: "What is going to come of it?—after you have made her understand?"

"The only thing that can come of it. While I have insisted, and still insist, that there has never been any sentiment wasted between us, the fact remains that Elizabeth is a woman, and she isn't going to sit down meekly and say, 'All right, Vance, dear; never mind,' when I make her understand that I have been trying my hardest to make love to another woman. She has plenty of spirit; she can fairly set you afire with those brown eyes of hers when the occasion demands it."

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"Well?" said Carfax.

"It will be all over but the shouting, then. She will doubtless tell me what she thinks of me and break the engagement, there and then—or try to. But that is the one thing I can't let her do, Poictiers. She needs the Uncle Byrd legacy, and I mustn't let her lose it."

Carfax got up and reached for the matches and his bed-room candle. "No," he said slowly; "you mustn't let her lose the legacy. To a man up a tree it would seem that the money is about all she is going to salvage out of the wreck." With which unkind daggering of the sinner whose sin had found him out, he went to bed.

XXIII

At Westwood House

THE autumn Sunday afternoon figured as the flawless half of a day of perfection, with the sky a vivid blue and the hardwood forest of the mountain top, lately touched by the first sharp frosts, a riot of gorgeous coloring. On the broad veranda of the ancient manor-house of Westwood the conversation, which had been desultory at best, languished in sympathy with the reposeful spell of time and place and the peaceful surroundings.

With a gently worded phrase of apology to his daughter's guest, the judge had pleaded an old man's privilege, dragging his chair to the farther end of the veranda and lighting his corn-cob pipe in courteous isolation. Tregarvon marked the bit of old-fashioned chivalric deference to Elizabeth, and wondered how many men of his own generation would be as thoughtfully considerate of the small amenities.

The thought was one of a series emphasizing

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the gross incredibility of the theory involving Richardia's father in the conspiracy against the Ocoee. That the white-haired, ruddy-faced Chesterfield of Westwood House might challenge an antagonist, give him the choice of weapons, and afterward kill him unflinchingly, was easily conceivable. But that he would descend to the methods of the dynamiter or the midnight assassin was momentarily growing more and more unbelievable.

With Elizabeth for his *vis-à-vis* in her broad-armed veranda chair, Tregarvon was finding it increasingly difficult to fix his attention upon the Ocoean mysteries. For some reasons—the unfamiliar surroundings, the gap of absence so suddenly and unexpectedly bridged, or because there was some subtle change in her—his cousin was singularly reticent. While the talk remained general she took her part in it; but whenever it threatened to become a dialogue, Tregarvon was instantly made to feel the raising of the barrier.

Since the guilty flee when no man pursueth, Tregarvon fancied he need be at no loss to account for Miss Wardwell's attitude. She had doubtless received his confession letter—though no mention had been made of it—and beyond that, she and Richardia had in all probability

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been comparing notes. He could feel the presence of the Damoclean sword suspended above his head, and was looking forward unjoyously to the moment when chance, or design on the part of Carfax and Richardia, would give Miss Wardwell her reproachful opportunity.

The dreaded moment came when Miss Richardia, who had been discussing autumn flowers with Carfax, asked the golden youth if he would like to see her chrysanthemums and asters in the sheltered posy-patch in the rear of the manor-house. And when they were gone, Tregarvon was left alone with his responsibilities.

It was Miss Wardwell who first broke the little silence which followed the departure of the flower seekers, and her manner was distinctly at variance with her accustomed attitude of serenity and self-possession; was rather the manner of one marching reluctantly but firmly up to the mouth of a loaded cannon.

"Were you tremendously shocked yesterday afternoon when you learned that I was coming?" she asked.

"It is no use to deny it," he confessed bravely. "It was a complete surprise—as you probably intended it to be."

"No; I didn't intend it—until just at the last.

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Richardia has been asking me to come down, and she knew a week or more ago that I was coming. I supposed, of course, she would tell you, and didn't know that she hadn't told you until I received her last letter, just as we were leaving."

"You came with your father and mother?"

"Yes. Pennsylvania has been building some monuments on the old battle-fields, and papa is one of the commissioners. He and mamma didn't particularly wish to be bothered with me, I imagine, but I had to come. Have you guessed why, Vance?"

Tregarvon thought he knew the constraining reason very well, indeed, but he was not quite courageous enough to say so. Instead, he temporized, as a man will, postponing the instant when the hair-hung sword must fall.

"I'm the poorest of mind-readers," he protested. "I can't even read my own, at times. But I suppose you have my letter, and you thought it ought to be answered in person."

"I have had many letters from you: which one do you mean?"

"The one I wrote a week ago to-day in the hotel in Chattanooga."

She shook her head slowly. "No; your last letter was written two weeks ago, and it was

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postmarked 'Coalville.' I remember you said you were writing after Poitiers had gone to bed."

Tregarvon groaned inwardly. The thing which he thought had been safely done had not been done at all; it still remained to be done. He was bracing himself to take the plunge when she went on hurriedly:

"You were saying just now that you couldn't read your own mind—sometimes. I wish I might read it now—this moment, Cousin Vance!" She was trying to look him fairly in the eyes and was not succeeding very well.

"Read my mind?—heaven forbid!" he gasped. Then he came to his senses and tried to repair the terrible misstep. "You know—er—you know what I mean; a man's mind is seldom fit for a— a good woman to look into, Elizabeth."

"Yours is, always," she asserted loyally, and he winced as if she had struck him a blow. "I assure you I haven't known you all my life for nothing, Vance. And it was because I had known you as no other woman ever will, that I was willing to try to make you happy."

He was wondering dumbly how much of this he could stand when she continued, quite calmly, though the brown eyes were looking past him.

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"As I have said, I had to come: there is a crisis; and with your letters before me, I couldn't write. We agreed once, you remember, to go around the sentimental field instead of going through it; but—but you haven't been living up to the spirit of that agreement in your letters."

Tregarvon found his handkerchief and mopped his face. The matchless autumn afternoon had grown suddenly sweltering for him.

"You mean that I've been writing you love-letters? I'm a brute, Elizabeth. I——"

"Please don't make it any harder for me than you are obliged to," she pleaded gently. "If you stop me now, I shall never be able to go on. I have come all the way down here to say something to you; something that I couldn't write, and a thing that every added letter of yours was making more difficult to say. But one word from you now will make it easier—if it is the right word. Tell me, Vance; hasn't this separation proved to you that we couldn't—that cousins ought not to marry?"

Slowly it ground its way into his brain that the worst had befallen; that Elizabeth, really and truly in love with him, now, had guessed, either from his letters or from Richardia's, the true state of affairs; and that womanly pride

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and affection had brought her to the scene of action to commit martyrdom.

"Oh, by Jove!—you mustn't, Elizabeth!" he broke out in a sudden access of contrition. "I can't allow you to outdo me in pure generosity that way! And, besides, there is Uncle Byrd's money."

"I have thought of that, too," she said, quite judiciously. "But, Vance, dear, we must simply rise superior to all the mere money considerations. Richardia has been telling me about your prospects here—your mine—and your brave struggle to make something out of nothing. You will need Uncle Byrd's money; you are needing it now. And I—if we—well, I shall not need it, anyhow," she ended rather incoherently.

"The Lord help me, Elizabeth!" he groaned, entirely ignoring the white-haired, white-mustached figure smoking peacefully at the farther end of the veranda. "I don't deserve——"

"I know you don't," she agreed instantly; "you deserve . . . well, you deserve something quite different. But whatever happens, and whatever you say, I must do what I came here to do. I—I have made a discovery, Cousin Vance."

"Of course you have," he said desperately. "I knew you would, sooner or later, though I have

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tried awfully hard to make myself believe that there wasn't any discovery to be made."

"I know: but seriously, Vance; deep down in your heart, you don't really care, do you?"

"Why, Elizabeth! Of course I care. And I have blamed myself straight through from the first."

"Oh, but you musn't do that!" she protested quickly. "It is all my fault, or my—no, I simply *won't* call it a misfortune."

"Your fault?" he queried. "You mean because you didn't suspect it and choke it off right at the beginning. But I haven't give you a chance to do that, have I?"

"I didn't suspect it," she said musingly; "I was very far from suspecting it. It came all at once, like a blow, you know; and then it was too late to 'choke it off,' as you say."

The man, the true man, in him rose up in its might to buffet him into the path of uprightness and straightforwardness. "No; it is not too late, Elizabeth," he assured her gravely.

"Yes, it is," she objected with pathetic earnestness.

"No," he insisted. "We must still make good. Do you know what people at home will say if our engagement is broken now? They will say

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that I made it impossible for you to carry out Uncle Byrd's wishes; and that I did it deliberately, to get the money for myself."

"But you haven't!" she cried in wide-eyed astonishment. "*I am the guilty one.*"

"You?"

"Yes. This is what I came all the way from Philadelphia to say to you, Vance. Do you remember, one time when we were trying to 'galvanize,' I think that was the word you used, ourselves into the sentimental ecstasy supposed to be the normal condition of engaged people, I told you jokingly that if I ever found any one whom I could really lo—like better——"

"Elizabeth!"

She nodded soberly and looked away from him. "Yes; it is true; and I had to come and tell you. You may despise me; it is your privilege."

Tregarvon got up and took the necessary step to the veranda end which gave him the view into the rearward flower-garden. They were there, Carfax and Richardia, bending together over the chrysanthemums. When he turned back to face his cousin he was smiling grimly.

"As our cattle-ranching cousin in the West would say, you mustn't 'rawhide' yourself too severely, Elizabeth. Leaving the dollars out of

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it—and I'll find a way to leave them out if I have to throw them to the birds—I'm getting about what I deserve; which is the glad hand all around the block."

"You are bitter, and I can't blame you," she said, with something alarmingly like a sob at the catching of her breath. "But really, at the very bottom of it all, you don't care so very much, do you, Vance?"

"Don't I? I'd be a mighty good specimen of the superman if I didn't care. Who is this fellow who, coming after me, is preferred before me?"

"I—I can't tell you that."

"Why can't you?"

"Because—oh, you are perfectly savage with me!—because he has had no right to speak, nor I to listen. He hasn't spoken; he may never speak. But that doesn't make any difference."

"No," said Tregarvon wearily; "nothing makes any difference now. But I told you a moment ago not to reproach yourself too bitterly. I am in precisely the same sort of a boat myself, Elizabeth—without your good hope of getting ashore."

"You? *Vance!*"

The grim smile came again, and he said—though

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rather in shame than in malice: "It hurts a little, doesn't it?—when it is the other way about. For nearly a week I have been thinking that you knew. I told you all about it, you know, in the letter I wrote last Sunday night in Chattanooga; the letter which seems to have gone astray. That is why I was so slow in getting your meaning: I was looking for you to dagger me the other way around, you know."

Miss Wardwell was no longer embarrassed, but she was well-nigh tearful.

"I suppose it is one of those horridly pretty Southern girls in the school," she said half-spitefully. "Have you——"

"No," he hastened to say; "I have been almost as decent as the other fellow; the fellow you won't name for me. I haven't asked her to marry me."

"And she?"

"She is going to marry a man old enough to be her father—if she doesn't reconsider and marry a young donkey of a millionaire."

Rucker, following an order which had been given him earlier in the day, was tooling the yellow car up the weed-grown carriage approach, coming to drive the two young men back to Coalville. Also, Carfax and Miss Birrell were

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returning from the posy-patch. Miss Wardwell stood up and put her hands into Tregarvon's.

"I'm sorry and happy and miserable all in the same breath," she said. "I shall be here for a few days. Papa and mamma are going over to the Shiloh battle-field after they leave Chattanooga, and I shall stay until they come back. You'll come again, won't you?"

He was able to smile down into the brown eyes of beseeching. The stabbed-vanity pain was passing—a little.

"Most certainly I shall come, as often as you can get me an invitation, and as my job on the Ocoee will permit. I don't propose to lose my best cousin just because I happen to have lost a lot of other things."

This was the key-note of the cheerful tone which he contrived to preserve throughout the leave-takings. But at the car boarding he let Carfax have the tonneau to himself, taking the seat beside Rucker for the better chance it offered for a needed interval in which to bind up the wounds of the pierced *amour-propre*.

XXIV

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WHEN the yellow motor-car, driven by Rucker with his customary disregard for speed limitations, had crossed the mountain and was approaching Highmount and the forking of the wood road leading to the old negro burying-ground, Tregarvon told the mechanician to stop and let him out. To Carfax he made plausible excuse: Tryon was watching at the drilling plant and he might have something to report. It was still only mid-afternoon, and Tregarvon added that he would walk to Coalville by way of the tramhead and the short-cut path.

After the car had gone on, Tregarvon kept the first part of his promise, covering the half-mile briskly. Tryon was at his post, killing time with the aid of strong tobacco and a railroad man's clay pipe. He had relieved Rucker at noon, in accordance with his orders; there had been no Sunday-afternoon visitors—nothing to disturb the peace of the day of rest.

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Tregarvon listened perfunctorily to the foreman's report. His object in delaying his return to Coalville had been only half formed at the moment of car stopping, but it had nothing to do with checking up the day-watchman. The talk with Elizabeth and its astounding revelations had opened new vistas. With Elizabeth calmly proposing to marry some one else, if the some one else should ask her, a full half of the spur which had been driving him to fight the Ocoee battle to a finish was gone.

Under the changed conditions the sensible thing to do, after all, might be to close with the coal trust's offer. But before committing himself finally to this, he was inclined to go to Hartridge with a frank plea for a word of friendly advice. From what had transpired it was evident that the professor of mathematics knew much more about the Ocoee and its mysteries than he had as yet been willing to tell; and though the episode of the steel cubes seemed to array him definitely on the side of the enemy, his later warning in the matter of bargain and sale was unquestionably disinterested, if not actively amicable.

Tregarvon was still considering the half-formed resolve to appeal to Hartridge when Tryon fished in the pocket of his overalls and brought up

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three small cubes of metal, the exact counterparts of the one which Carfax had taken from the pocket of the schoolmaster's overcoat.

"I been savin' these to show you," said the foreman, handing the bits of metal to Tregarvon. "What-all d'you reckon they're meant for?"

Tregarvon permitted the query to go unanswered. "Where did you find them?" he asked.

"In the pocket of an old coat that Jim Sawyer's been wearin' here on the job. It's hangin' up in the tool shanty. I run out o' matches a little spell ago, and went to rummagin' 'round to see if I couldn't find some."

"Sawyer's coat, eh?" said Tregarvon, struck suddenly alert.

Tryon nodded soberly. "An' that ain't all," he went on. "I got a file and tried 'em; they're harder 'n flint—been tempered till you couldn't cut 'em with anything softer 'n an emery-wheel. Rucker'd been tellin' me how the drills went all to the bad that time when you was hung up before the old b'iler bu'sted. Sawyer's got a toolbox in the shanty where he keeps his wrenches and little traps. It was locked, but I happened to have a key that fitted. What d'you reckon I found?"

"More of these?"

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"You've hit it plumb centre; a tomatter can about half full of 'em."

"Tell me all you know about Sawyer," Tregarvon cut in concisely.

"What I know about him wouldn't get him a job anywheres where I had the say-so. Last summer he was workin' for the C. C. & I. at Whitlow—a strike-breaker. Before that he was doin' time at Brushy Mountain, for some sort o' crookedness, I dunno what. Maybe I ort to 'a' told you this when you hired him, but I allowed you knowed what you was doin', an' it wasn't none o' my business. He's a good drill boss."

Tregarvon was examining the bits of steel critically. "Tryon, I'd give something to know just where these came from originally," he said.

"Maybe I might help out a little on that, too. I served my time in the shop before I went to work for the railroad. D'you know what kind o' steel that is?"

"No."

"It's some o' that new-fangled, high-speed tool steel that you temper by heatin' it white-hot and coolin' it in a fan blast. Jenkins, the Whitlow blacksmith, was showin' me a piece of it last Sat'day night at Tait's. Looked like it might 'a'

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been cut off the same bar with these little chunks o' Jim Sawyer's."

"In other words, you believe that these bits were made in the Whitlow blacksmith shop?"

"I ain't a-sayin' so, because I can't prove it. But my boy, Tom, saw Thaxter, the Whitlow bookkeeper, stop his buggy in the big road two or three days ago whilst a man came out o' the bushes to talk to him. The man was Jim Sawyer. More 'n that, there's just natchelly only the one place in the Wehatchee where that steel *could* come from. They've got it at Whitlow, an' I don't reckon there's ar' another blacksmith shop in the valley that ever heerd tell of it."

"Tryon, you've done a good afternoon's work," said the master of Ocoee, dropping the three cubes into his pocket. "We owe all of our hard luck, excepting the blown-up boiler, which may have been due to its own rottenness, to the C. C. & I., with Thaxter pulling the strings and Sawyer doing the actual dirty work. Isn't that the way you have it figured out?"

"That's about the way it *ort* to stack up," said the foreman. "But somehow it don't gee all the way 'round. You'd say it's mighty near a dead cinch that Sawyer was the one that doped the drill-hole with these here slow-'em-downs;

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but right there the vein pinches out. Them two times that the walkin'-beam fell down, Sawyer was the man that stood the best chance o' gettin' his head bu'sted. Then you an' Mr. Carfax both saw the man that put the dannymite into the old b'iler, an' I hain't heerd neither one of you a-sayin' it was Sawyer. You'd 'a' knowed him, wouldn't you?"

"It wasn't Sawyer," said Tregarvon definitively. "Sawyer has a beard, and that man was smooth-faced."

"Jes' so," nodded the foreman. Then he drew his own conclusion. "I been knowin' the C. C. & I. crowd, off an' on, ever sence they took holt here in the Wehatchee. I reckon they'd rough-house you in a holy minute if they thought that was the easiest way to get the best o' you in some business fight. I wouldn't even put the dannymitin' a-past 'em. But they wouldn't go at it in no such a bunglesome way; n'r they wouldn't put skulls in your fire-box, n'r any such fool monkeyshines as that. Them things don't fit in."

Again Tregarvon bestowed the meed of praise where praise was due.

"Tryon, you have a pretty level head. I am beginning to suspect that we made a mistake in not calling you in as chief detective in this muddle.

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But you still think that Thaxter and Sawyer worked the drill-dulling scheme, don't you?"

"Ez I say, that part of it proves up toler'ble plain. If there was ar' reason, now, why they'd want to be holdin' you back for a little spell——"

"There is a reason. They are trying to buy me out."

"Now you're talkin'!" said the foreman sagely. "Maybe you've got coal here under your feet, 'r maybe you hain't. *You* don't know, yet, an' maybe *they* don't know. But they'd just as soon you wouldn't find out for sure whilst the dick-erin' 's goin' on. They'd like as not call it 'good business' to hold you up for a spell, wouldn't they?"

"Quite likely," Tregarvon was glancing at his watch. The call upon Hartridge had now become a necessity, if only for apologetic and explanatory reasons. True, it was still possible that the professor had been in collusion with the planter of steel cubes on the night of surprises, but these later developments seemed to exonerate him handsomely. "I must go," he told the foreman. "Rucker will relieve you here in time for you to go to your supper. If Sawyer should happen to turn up, just keep your own counsel about what we have discovered. We'll deal with him—and his bosses—when the time comes."

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A few minutes beyond this, Tregarvon was at Highmount, inquiring for Professor Hartridge. The young woman who answered his ring told him that the professor had gone over to the McNabb neighborhood to see a sick child. Not wishing to let his opportunity escape, Tregarvon set out to walk through the forest, taking a path leading in the general direction of the sunken mountain-top valley known locally as the "Pocket"; this on the chance of meeting Hartridge and walking back to the school with him.

Now it so chanced that Tregarvon had never visited the "Pocket," and though he knew, from Carfax's description of the locality, that it could not be more than a mile or two beyond Highmount, he was not aware that the path he had chosen was not the right one. Having plenty of other things to think about, he paid little attention to his surroundings until, at the end of a half-hour, he found that the path, which had been growing indistinct, had disappeared entirely, leaving him in a region of deep ravines with their slopes heavily wooded; hollows boulder-strewn, in which the old-growth timber stood thickly, with only a fallen and rotting trunk here and there to show where the tan-bark gatherers had slain some monarch of the forest for the paltry stripping

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of its outer skin—mute testimony to the waste of a nation.

It was not until after he had covered distance enough, as he thought, to have taken him all the way across from Highmount to the western brow of the mountain, that he saw a man—whom he took to be Hartridge—sitting upon a flat stone in the shadow of a great boulder on the opposite side of a small mountain brook. Just as he was about to call out and make his presence known, the man sprang to his feet suddenly, as if in alarm, and whipped a weapon from his pocket.

Obeying the instinct of self-preservation in pure automatism, Tregarvon dropped silently behind the nearest boulder on his own side of the stream. When he looked again he saw that the man was not Hartridge; he was a much younger man; a handsome young fellow, well-built and athletic-looking, with nothing in his appearance to connect him with the mountain and its natives. The attitude of strained anxiety into which the quick leap afoot had thrown him lasted only for a moment. While Tregarvon looked, a warbling bird whistle rose shrill and clear on the windless air. The watcher saw the young man hastily pocket the pistol and heard him whistle a reply. Almost at the same instant the figure of a woman

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appeared at the buried up-hill heel of the great boulder. She stood for a moment in the yellow light of the westering sun, long enough for Tregarvon to recognize her beyond any question of doubt. Then she ran, slipping and sliding, down the leaf-carpeted hazard slope, to be caught in the arms of the waiting man.

For a little time Tregarvon sat with his back to the sheltering boulder, trying to surround this latest and newest development in the maze of mysteries. Slowly it came to him that this was the explanation of Richardia's attitude; the reason why she had slipped aside, masking the true state of affairs and rebuffing him by seeming to accept the attentions of Carfax. One by one the corroborative inferences fell into place, each fitting with exact nicety: Richardia's piquant reticences; her half-confidences which had always stopped short of revelation; her little flights to the shelter of detachment whenever the talk threatened to lean toward sentiment; all these were signs which might have been read—which were plainly readable now in the light of the small tableau staging itself in the shadow of the great rock on the opposite hillside.

Tregarvon peeped again. It was most obviously a lovers' meeting. The young man had drawn

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the judge's daughter to a seat beside him on the flat stone, and he still had his arm about her. They were talking eagerly in low tones; Tregarvon could hear only a murmur of voices, but Richardia's face was toward him, and in it he re-read his complete effacement. In a series of revealing flashes more of the corroborative fragments whisked into place; he had been blind not to see the pointing of certain playful allusions made now and then at the Caswells' dinner-table and aimed at the music teacher. Doubtless, to the small world of the mountain top, these Sunday-afternoon trysts in the forest were an old story. But why were they clandestine? The answer fitted itself promptly. By all accounts Judge Birrell was a person of shrewd prejudices; quite possibly he disapproved of this young man who had stolen his daughter's heart; and perhaps the disapproval was not entirely without reason. Tregarvon recalled the signs of perturbation and the sudden pistol drawing which had preceded Richardia's appearance.

In deference to a prompting which took its color more from complete and hopeless chagrin than from any charitable scruples, Tregarvon squared his back against the concealing boulder and refused to look any more. While the pair

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across the streamlet kept their places, it was impossible for him to retreat undiscovered. The waiting interval was not unduly long. When he could no longer distinguish the murmur of voices he ventured to peep again. The flat-stone seat was empty and they were gone.

The sun had dropped behind the mountain, and Tregarvon was tramping soberly through the lengthening wood shadows toward Highmount, when the frock-coated figure of the professor of mathematics loomed suddenly in the path ahead. At Tregarvon's call, Hartridge stopped and waited.

"This is a pleasant surprise," said the school-master, with his genial smile. "Are you walking my way?"

"Very pointedly," said Tregarvon. "They told me at the college that you had gone to one of the McNabbs', and I came out on the chance of meeting you."

"That was neighborly, I'm sure," returned the master of arts, catching the step. "Am I to infer that you are going to let me be of some service to you?"

Tregarvon's laugh was a trifle strained. "It's a little that way," he confessed. "But first I wish to say that I believe we have been doing you an injustice—Carfax and I."

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"About the small cube of the metal known commercially as steel?" was the gentle inquiry.

"Precisely. I'm sorry we were not broad-minded enough to take your word in explanation."

"Then you have discovered the real culprit?"

For answer Tregarvon briefed the story of Tryon's findings.

"Ah!" said the listener; "then my own impression wasn't at fault, after all. I saw the man under the drill derrick: I thought it was Sawyer, but I couldn't be certain. I assume you don't need to be told why he did it, or who bribed him to do it?"

"No. For some reason best known to themselves, the C. C. & I. people do not wish me to drill that test-hole in the old burying-ground. Do you know the reason, Professor Hartridge?"

It was too nearly dark for Tregarvon to see the quizzical smile which this query evoked, but he knew it was there.

"You are asking me as man to man, Mr. Tregarvon?"

"I am—just that. I have been condemning you unjustly, and you now have a most excellent chance to heap coals of fire upon my head."

"You are making it impossible for me to hold

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malice," was the genial response. "I wish I could answer your question definitely; but I cannot. I do *not* know why Thaxter should wish to prevent you from drilling that particular test-hole."

"You mean that I am not going to find the paying vein of coal under the old burying-ground?"

"I am practically certain that you are not."

"Would you mind giving me your reasons?"

"They are geological—and conclusive. The strata under the glade are precisely the same as those occurring at your tramhead. Moreover, if you will take the trouble to examine the ground at the foot of the cliff below your present location you will find the coal outcrop: a single vein, not over twenty inches thick. A little lower down you will find another, still thinner."

Tregarvon laughed mirthlessly. "I asked you for bread, and you have given me a stone," he protested. "Am I to assume that Consolidated Coal is better informed than you are, professor?"

Hartridge's reply was guarded. "No man is infallible, Mr. Tregarvon. I speak only of the things I know."

"Then there is a chance that, in spite of your geological deduction, Thaxter and the men he represents have more accurate data?"

This time the professor's rejoinder was fairly

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cryptic. "The earth holds many secrets. During the long interval in which the Ocoee properties were allowed to lie idle and uncared for, it was anybody's privilege to investigate them. I am violating no confidence in saying that the people who are now trying to induce you to sell have made a number of surveys. They probably know your ground foot by foot."

Once more Tregarvon found himself confronted by the dead wall of Hartridge's reservations. That the professor was making reservations he did not doubt for an instant. There was still some bar to perfect frankness, and he seemed powerless to break it down. In sheer desperation he shunted the talk to the field of the obstacles.

"It seems to be conclusively proved that the drill dulling is chargeable to Thaxter, acting through the man Sawyer," he said. "But Tryon refuses to believe that the other harassings have been inspired by the trust."

They had reached the Highmount boundary, and Hartridge paused with his hand on the gate latch.

"I am entirely at one with your foreman in that belief, Mr. Tregarvon," he rejoined. "Now that we are again upon amicable terms, I may confess that I have been greatly interested in the

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problem which these harassments have presented—the solving of problems being one of my small recreations. Did you leave an enemy at home who would be vindictive enough to follow you here?”

Tregarvon shook his head. “So far as I know, I hadn’t an enemy in the wide world when I came here.”

“Then you have developed one *in situ*, as it were, and a very unscrupulous one. Have you formed any theory of your own?”

“None that is worth considering. At first, I suspected the McNabbs, fancying that their enmity might be a holdover on account of the old lawsuit about the land titles. That was before I knew that I had two of them working for me in the drill-gang. Later—I am ashamed to confess it—I thought that possibly Judge Birrell might have passed the word that I was to be driven out. That was a pure absurdity, of course.”

“Quite so,” said the professor. “The judge is entirely incapable of doing such a thing, bitter as some of his prejudices are. It need not be denied that he was prejudiced against you at first. One evening, when he was driving with his daughter, he visited your drilling plant and was greatly

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incensed at finding it in the old Westwood slave burying-ground. But now you and Mr. Carfax have met him and have eaten at his table, and this, to a man of his characteristics, salves all wounds. Besides, as a matter of fact, you owe the help which enabled you to place your new power-plant directly to the judge. It was he who sent word to the mountain-folk to turn out with their teams."

"You surprise me!" said Tregarvon. "How did he know?"

Hartridge smiled amiably. "You are not wholly in Mr. Carfax's confidence, it would seem. On the evening when you had the trouble with the valley farmers, he and Miss Richardia drove over to Westwood House in your car while we waited dinner for them here at the school. And the next morning, presto! you had your help."

"You are guessing at this?"

"Not wholly. I have just been to the "Pocket" to see Sill McNabb's little daughter, who is sick—doctoring people being another of my small recreations. When I pressed him, Sill told me that the order to help you came from Judge Birrell, and that it was put upon the score of common neighborliness."

"But the idea of helping me originated with

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the judge's daughter," Tregarvon put in soberly. "Why should she wish to return good for evil, Professor Hartridge?"

This time Hartridge's smile was less amiable.

"Miss Richardia's motives are not to be questioned by either of us, Mr. Tregarvon. But why should you call her interest in your affair returning good for evil?"

Tregarvon fought away from the edge of the pit into which his incorrigible ingenuousness was about to precipitate him.

"Oh, there isn't any reason why she should consider me. Within the past hour I have had the best possible proof of that."

Hartridge was silent for a moment. Then he said: "Mr. Tregarvon, I trust you are a gentleman in all that the much-misused word implies."

"A man may hardly assert that of himself," was the quick retort. "But why?"

"What you have just said implies a knowledge of a secret which has been most carefully guarded by Miss Richardia's friends. I am not in her confidence, but I shall take it upon myself to say that whatever she does is right."

"Who is the man?" Tregarvon asked bluntly.

"That is a question which Miss Richardia

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herself will doubtless answer at the proper time. Until she chooses to answer it, neither you nor I have any right to ask it."

Tregarvon was turning away to continue his walk to Coalville. But at the leave-taking instant he faced about for a final word.

"Has it ever occurred to you, Professor Hart-ridge, that this is a hell of a world?" he asked gloomily.

"It has—many times. Won't you stop and take pot-luck with us at the faculty table? No? Then I wish you a pleasant walk to the valley. Good night."

XXV

The Mangling of Poictiers

UPON leaving Highmount, Tregarvon took the short-cut path down the mountain, and was only a few minutes late for the dinner for two served by Uncle William in the office dining-room at Coalville. Though he had plenty of thought material of his own to work upon, he could hardly help observing that Carfax ate abstractedly and was unusually silent. While the old negro was coming and going, the talk, what little there was of it, touched lightly upon the visit to Westwood House; but after the table was cleared Carfax got up to stand with his back to the open fire and the commonplaces were thrust aside.

"When is it to be?" he asked abruptly.

Tregarvon, who was still dallying with the black coffee, looked up with a crooked smile.

"When is what to be?" he asked.

"You know what I mean. We gave you your chance with Elizabeth—Miss Richardia and I. I hope you're not going to tell me that you flunked it."

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The wry smile broke into a short laugh. "Oh, no; I didn't flunk it. But it's all over, Poitiers. I'm down and out."

Carfax was trying to light a cigarette, but the match went black and he did not seem to realize that he had no fire.

"So your crime has found you out, has it?" he said, and the gentle tone seemed to accentuate rather than to soften the accusing assumption.

Tregarvon shook his head. "It was the other way about. Elizabeth came down here for the express purpose of asking my permission to fall in love with some other fellow—no names named."

"*Wh-what!*"

"It is even so."

"And—and you believed her? You didn't have sense enough in that thick head of yours to know that she was merely trying to save your face?"

"Oh, no; you're off on the wrong foot altogether. She didn't get that letter I wrote her from Chattanooga, and she hadn't given me a chance to tell her about Richardia. It was perfectly straight. She has simply found the other man—the right man—and she is honest enough to say so."

"Do you mean to say that you didn't tell her anything about your crookedness down here?"

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"Oh, yes; we talked about that later on, though, again, there were no names named. She jumped to the conclusion that my 'crookedness', as you call it, was with one of the pretty undergraduates at Highmount, and I let it go at that. There was no use of making a bad matter worse by dragging Richardia's name into it."

Carfax took a pacing turn up and down the room, broke it to go and stand for a full minute staring out of a window at Uncle William's cook-house, and then faced about to say, almost pleadingly: "You are *sure* she meant it, Vance?"

"Of course she meant it. She wouldn't tell me much about the other fellow, except to say that it was some one whom I knew, and who was too decent to try to break in while our engagement still held good."

"And she—she really would give the—the other fellow a chance, if—if he had the nerve to ask for it?"

"It would be something better than 'a chance', I should say."

Again Carfax took a pacing turn, coming back from it to drop into the chair opposite Tregarvon.

"Vance, *I* am the 'other fellow,'" he said softly. "You didn't suspect it, did you? It

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began last summer when we were at Lake Placid together. I thought it was all on my side of the house; I didn't dream that she wasn't in love with you in the—in the way she ought to have been. But——”

The interruption was the entrance of a softly padding Uncle William, bearing a neatly tied packet of letters.

“Dey's for dat lily-white missy fr'm de Norf what's staying with Miss Dick up at de ol' place,” he explained. “Mistoo Tait, he brung 'em over, an' ast would you-all gemmen please to send 'em up when you had de chanst.”

Tregarvon had found the wry smile again by the time the old negro had shuffled away.

“I suppose I ought to congratulate you, Poitiers, but I can't just now; I'm too new a widower. You'll have to hug your happiness alone for the present. You'll excuse me, won't you? But, see here—how about this little side-play with Richardia? You're not going to be allowed to play fast and loose with her—not while I'm here to prevent it.”

Carfax was absently fingering the packet of letters.

“Hold on, Vance,” he broke in, “you've been saying, all along, that this last attack of yours—

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with Richardia—was the real thing; that there was no sentiment between you and Elizabeth.”

“That’s all very well,” said the attacked one, in a fresh thrill of self-pityings; “but I’m like the little kiddie who dropped his candy to reach for another piece and lost both. Just the same, it seems that you are due to get yours, too; you’ve proposed to one woman when you were in love with another. What did Richardia say to you when you asked her to marry you? That’s what I want to know now.”

The cherubic smile which was waiting for its chance in Carfax’s eyes turned slowly into an impish grin.

“As nearly as I can recall it, she said: ‘Most certainly not. Why should I?’ Of course, you have guessed that I asked her merely to give you a chance to be decently loyal to Elizabeth. Miss Richardia took it as it was meant, and we have been very good friends, playing the game at odd moments for your benefit when you seemed to be needing a bit of help.”

“Oh, yes; you were very kind; you are all very kind. But that doesn’t mend any broken bridges for me now. Do you want me to tell you why Richardia turned you and your ridiculous fortune down so easily? I can, you know,”

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and with that he told the story of his chance surprising of Miss Birrell's secret.

Carfax heard him through patiently and did not seem unduly surprised at the new development.

"That accounts for a good many things," he commented. "I have had a feeling for some time that Miss Richardia had something on her mind—something not altogether joyous. Once or twice she has seemed on the verge of confiding in me. It's a case of the obdurate father, isn't it?"

"I suppose so; though Hartridge didn't hint at anything of that sort."

"So Hartridge knows, too, does he?"

"They all know at Highmount, I fancy. And that reminds me: I've done it again—talked too much, as usual. I met Hartridge after I had seen the pair of them together, and we spoke of the love affair. Hartridge said it was Richardia's secret, and that her friends had been carefully keeping it for her. I shouldn't have told you."

"It is safe enough with me, as you ought to know: you will be the one to go and tell it all over the lot," was the unkind retort. And then: "These letters of Elizabeth's; she ought to have them, don't you think? Do you suppose I might——?"

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Tregarvon waved him away.

"The letters will be all the excuse you will need for making two calls in the same half-day. Take the car and go and do what you're aching to do. After you have sung your little song, you may give Elizabeth my love and my blessing. No, don't stop to talk any more; just make your little bow and vanish, before I get to thinking too pointedly of all the things you've done to me."

Carfax took his cue promptly, and before Tregarvon had finished filling his pipe the roar of the yellow car's motor told him that the golden youth had begun his flight to the mountain top. A short half-hour later, at a second filling of the pipe, the motor roar was repeated, and while the solitary smoker was wondering what had brought Carfax back so soon, the dining-room door opened to admit Wilmerding.

"You are responsible," said the young superintendent, explaining the motor-car clamor. "You gave me the fever, flaunting that big yellow devil of yours in my face, and I was obliged to go and buy. Want to take a little spin in the new wagon to see how she handles?"

Tregarvon pushed a chair into the fire-warmed semicircle for his visitor and shook his head.

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"Some other time—if you'll be good enough to let the invitation hang over. To-night I'd rather sit here before the fire with you and have a little heart-to-heart talk, Wilmerding. Will you indulge me?"

"Sure," was the ready response. "The joy ride can wait. Can you find me another pipe?"

The pipe was found and filled, and at its lighting Tregarvon began without preface, giving the steel-cube facts as they had been developed by Tryon and linking them up with Thaxter's apparently disinterested effort to promote the sale of the Ocoee to Consolidated Coal. "I'm telling you this, Wilmerding, because I know you're not implicated," he said in conclusion. "Also, because it seems no more than fair that you should know. I'm not specially vindictive, you understand. I suppose Thaxter and the men behind him are calling it nothing more than a bit of sharp practice on purely legitimate business lines."

"That might do for the drill-dulling," the superintendent conceded thoughtfully, "though I'd take pretty violent exceptions to that, if I were you. But doesn't this one proved rascality imply the authorship of all the others?"

"No. Hartridge thinks not, and so do I. By a good, vigorous stretch of imagination you could

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call the drill-dulling something less than criminal. But that can't be said of the attempt to wreck my motor-car, or of the risk taken of killing somebody by the smashing of the machinery and the planting of a dynamite cartridge in the engine-boiler."

While the evening lengthened they discussed the various phases of the mystery in all their bearings, and in the end Wilmerding came around to the Tryon-Hartridge hypothesis, namely, that Thaxter, unscrupulous as he may have been in bribing Sawyer, was not the instigator of the more serious barbarities.

"Not that I'm excusing Thaxter or the New York office from which he has his instructions," he added. "The 'Big Business' methods are all more or less crooked, and I'd give half of my salary if I didn't have to work for an outfit that simply won't fight in the open, as men ought to fight. Do you know, Tregarvon, I've been hoping against hope that you'd strike it, and strike it rich, on the Ocoee. In that case, I had made up my mind to ask you to hire me."

"If I had a mine, you couldn't ask anything that would please me better," said Tregarvon, warming to this expression of friendly loyalty. "But the thing looks pretty hopeless just now. As I have said, Professor Hartridge knows more

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about the Ocoee than anybody else seems to—and he won't tell all he knows. But he did assure me this afternoon that we are not going to find the big vein where we are drilling in the old burying-ground, and I have every reason to believe that he was telling the truth. That lets me out. Thaxter 'phoned me this morning that he had got the option extended until to-morrow midnight. I stand to lose a hundred thousand dollars if I take the time to move the drilling plant and try again."

Wilmerding rose to go, returning the borrowed pipe to its place on the mantel.

"It's a hard proposition," he admitted. "I'm not going to advise you to throw up the chance to get the hundred thousand. But if I were in your shoes, I'd be just reckless enough to gamble another throw or two. In this talk we've had, you have convinced me of one thing, Tregarvon, and that is that the Ocoee has a workable vein somewhere in the property. Hartridge knows it, and Consolidated Coal knows it. And what they know, some other fellow can find out. You have twenty-four hours, and a little better, in which to think it over. I said I wouldn't advise, but I shall: don't close with Thaxter one minute before you are obliged to."

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Tregarvon got out of his chair to shake hands with the departing visitor.

"You're a man, Wilmerding, and I wish I had your nerve. But a couple of things have happened to-day—things that I can't talk about, even to so good a friend as you are—and they have knocked me out. At the end of the ends, I'm afraid I shall weaken and sell out to your hog of a trust. It was good of you to come down and let me unload on you. If anything new turns up I'll get you on the wire. Good night, and good luck to you."

After Wilmerding had gone, Tregarvon sat for another hour before the fire, smoking abstractedly and hardly noting the passing of time. In due course there was another flurry of gas-engine noises, and when the clamor died away, Carfax came in to fling himself into the chair where Wilmerding had been sitting.

Tregarvon broke the silence morosely.

"Well? You are not measuring up very strikingly with the commonly accepted idea of the happy lover. What's the latest?"

Carfax had taken a cork-tipped cigarette from his case and was absently trying to set fire to the wrong end of it.

"Vance," he said, in his gentlest tone, "you

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deserve to be murdered in cold blood. You told me that Elizabeth hadn't gotten that frenzied letter you wrote her the day you were in Chattanooga. She hadn't, but it was merely delayed; it was in that lot of forwarded mail that I took up to-night, and I—I gave it to her!"

"So that's the latest, is it? Where does the tragedy come in?"

"Don't say another word or I shall explode! You have probably forgotten that you wrote her that I was as good as engaged to Richardia Birrell—it would be quite like you to forget. She excused herself to go and read her letters, and when she came back I knew that the heavens had fallen. Oh, no; there wasn't any scene; she just simply wouldn't give me a chance to get a word in edgewise, though I tried for a solid hour to make the chance. I'm ruined for life—and you, with your nimble little pen and your neat facility for telling all you know, and then some, *you* had to be the one to mangle me!"

XXVI

Tryon's News

TREGARVON awoke on the Monday morning with the feeling of the putative bankrupt who is facing his final day of grace. Before midnight the bargain-and-sale decision must be made; and he knew perfectly well that there would be no chance in the short interval which still remained of adding to the facts as they stood. Nevertheless, after Carfax had disappeared, walking, in the direction of Hesterville, Tregarvon plunged into the routine, entering into a wire correspondence with the Chattanooga machinery firm and trying to extort a promise that the needed valve and steam-pipe should be shipped without fail by the afternoon train.

Since Carfax did not put in an appearance for the noon meal, Tregarvon ate alone. While he was at table Tryon came in to report. Early in the morning the man Sawyer had turned up at the drilling ground with a one-horse wagon and had taken his belongings, including the working-coat, and the tool-box, containing among other things the reserve supply of steel cubes. Tryon was of

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the opinion that the drill boss was preparing to vanish, and suggested the taking of preventive measures. Though Sawyer would doubtless be a most unwilling witness, it might be needful to make sure that he could be found when wanted.

Tregarvon concurred mechanically, telling the foreman to spread an unofficial drag-net for Sawyer, and agreeing to swear out a warrant for the man's arrest if he should attempt to run away. Beyond this, he sent one of the laborers up to the drilling-stand to give Rucker a chance to sleep; and, later in the afternoon, sent word to Tryon's house directing the foreman to share the coming night-watch with the mechanician; all this also as a matter of routine, since, with the suspension of working operations, there had been no threats of further aggressions.

Just before the evening meal Carfax returned abstracted and silent, and saying nothing as to the manner in which he had spent the day. Immediately after dinner he asked Tregarvon if he might have the motor-car.

"Going up to Westwood House to try again?" queried the motor-car's owner, not too sympathetically.

"I'm no good to you here," was the non-committal rejoinder; and a little later Tregarvon

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found himself facing the approaching crisis alone and still undecided.

Thaxter had telephoned during the afternoon, calling attention once more to the terms of the offer to purchase. The message had taken the tone of a friendly warning. There was no hope of securing further delay, but the bookkeeper would give Tregarvon the benefit of all the time that remained. He would stay in his Whitlow office, or be within call, up to midnight, and he hoped that Tregarvon would be sensible and remember the old saw about the bird in the hand.

Tregarvon was remembering the canny proverb—and a good many other things—when he lighted his after-dinner pipe. Throughout the entire day he had been wavering and postponing the moment of action. One hundred thousand dollars, judiciously invested, would provide an income for his mother and sister, which, however far it might fall short of the former Tregarvon lavishnesses, would still place them securely beyond the hazard of want. On the other hand, a certain innate obstinacy, grown now to a passion which threatened to drive cool-blood reason to the wall, refused to yield.

Apart from this, there was a question of pure ethics to be considered. Quite early in the at-

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tempt to develop the Ocoee he had secretly determined, if his efforts should prove successful, to reorganize the company, taking in those who had suffered loss; in other words, to make restitution to Parker's victims. But if the property should be sold to the trust there was an end of the generous intention, and the nail of injustice driven by Parker would be irrevocably clinched.

These were some of the perplexities, but there was another which also demanded a hearing. Carfax had been most generous and loyal, spending not only his money but himself. But now the conditions were changed—or changing. Carfax had another interest, suddenly grown imperative. Would it not be most unfair to drag him still deeper into the discouraging fight, allowing him to spend more money which might never be repaid?

At this point in the reflective probings Tregarvon began to argue that he must see and talk with Carfax again before he could decide finally and definitely; and he had no sooner reached this conclusion, and was casting about for the means to translate it into action, when Wilmerding appeared—a veritable god-in-the-machine, since he was driving his new car.

“Thaxter was telling me that you'd most likely

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be making him a business call this evening, and I thought I'd drive over and take you back in my car," said the newly made motor enthusiast. "If I'm butting in, don't scruple to chase me away."

Tregarvon was already taking his driving-coat from its closet in the fireplace corner. "You have come precisely in the nick of time," he returned. "Carfax has taken my car to drive to Westwood House, and I must have a few minutes' talk with him before I fight the final round with Thaxter. Will your car climb the big hill?"

"If it won't, I'll scrap it and buy another," laughed the Pittsburgher; and five minutes later the new, high-powered roadster was storming up the Pisgah grades.

Eight minutes was the time to the Highmount gates, and Tregarvon called it a beat, though he had never timed his own car over the same distance. Eight other minutes covered the cross-mountain run to the western brow; and it was not until Wilmerding had tooled the roadster up the Westwood House driveway and was parking it beside the yellow touring-car that Tregarvon began to wonder if, with Elizabeth as her guest, Richardia would not be breaking her school routine by spending her evenings at home. In

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that case . . . but it was now too late to retreat, and, with Wilmerding at his elbow, he ran up the steps to set the old-fashioned knocker of the great door clanging its drumbeat through the echoing interiors.

When Aunt Phyllis, the solemn-faced old negress who was the sole survivor of the once numerous household retinue, opened the drawing-room doors for the two callers, the judge's daughter was at the piano, the judge was listening luxuriously in a deep, calico-covered armchair, and Carfax was sitting with Miss Wardwell in a window-seat at the farther end of the room.

Wilmerding made his own and Tregarvon's apologies when the judge got upon his feet to welcome the newcomers.

"We were taking a spin in my new car," he explained, tactfully leaving Tregarvon's errand unmentioned. "Of course, we couldn't pass your hospitable door, Judge Birrell."

"No, suh; most suttainly you couldn't," was the ready response. "The do-ahs of old Westwood House may creak a little on thei-uh hinges, suh, but they still swing wide enough to let the guest enter at his pleas-yuh. Find yo-uh places, gentlemen, if you please; my daughtuh is giving us a little music."

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Miss Wardwell had risen, with Carfax back-grounding her because he was obliged to, and Tregarvon introduced Wilmerding as a fellow Pennsylvanian from the Pittsburgh end of the State. Elizabeth was pleasantly gracious to the young superintendent of coal mines, seeming to welcome him as in some sort a saver of situations; at least, so it appeared to Tregarvon. In the readjustment the judge sank back into the depths of his armchair, and Carfax surrendered his place in the window-seat to Wilmerding and wandered to another window to stand with his back to the room and his hands in his pockets. This was Tregarvon's opportunity to say the needed word to the golden youth, but at its offering a sudden passionate impulse seized him and he crossed quickly to the piano alcove. "I see you have my nocturne," he whispered, bending over the pianist and indicating the Chopin on the piano-desk; "please play it for me."

As if his masterful mood were not to be safely denied, her fingers fell upon the keys in the opening chords of the nocturne; and this was the beginning of what gradually grew to be an interval of suspended possibilities. Almost at once, Tregarvon realized that Richardia was playing only from the fingers outward—faultlessly, but

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mechanically; that Carfax was wandering from one window to another in a sort of aimless unrest; that Elizabeth was setting all her serene traditions at defiance by chatting eagerly, like an escaped school-girl, with Wilmerding.

A few minutes further along, when Carfax dragged a chair into the window recess and deliberately broke in upon Miss Wardwell and her companion, the spirit of disquietude seemed to seize upon the judge, also, since he wheeled his arm-chair to face the window group and did violence to all the Westwood House musical unities by joining in the low-toned conversation. This gave Tregarvon his excuse; and when the nocturne ran away at its close into delicate little improvisations, he spoke again in the guarded undertone.

"Hartridge may have told you that I accidentally surprised your secret yesterday afternoon. I did, you know; but I want you to be assured that it is as safe with me as it is with the professor, or with any of your friends who know it."

If he were expecting any manifestation of surprise it was not forthcoming. So far from it, there was no break in the improvisation harmonies.

"Some day I hope it won't be necessary to

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make a secret of it," she replied evenly, matching his low tone.

"Does Elizabeth know?"

"Not yet. But I shall tell her."

"Has she told you that our engagement is broken?"

Her nod was barely perceptible.

"I hope she told you that I didn't break it."

"Yes; she told me that, too."

"You are not saying it, but deep down in your heart you are telling yourself that I have got only what was coming to me. Isn't that true?"

The answer came from lips that were paling a little. "Ask yourself."

"It *is* true. And it is also true, perhaps, that I should have had this other whipping; the one I got yesterday afternoon when I was trying to meet Hartridge on his way back from the 'Pocket.'"

She was still keeping her face averted.

"I can't talk about that now, to any one—least of all, to you."

He bent lower to make sure that the group at the other end of the room should not overhear.

"I want to meet the man. If I stay here on Mount Pisgah—if I don't throw it all up and go home—I mean to do what I can to help. Once I

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shouldn't have been big enough to say such a thing, Richardia; but—thank God—I've grown a little in the past few months. May I add that it is you who have shown me how to grow?"

She ignored the query and for the first time let him see her eyes: they were swimming, and there was a note in her voice that he had never heard before when she said: "You must not talk of giving up and going away; you are the one who can do the most to help when the time comes—if only——"

A clamorous banging of the door-knocker interrupted, and Aunt Phyllis put her turbaned head into the drawing-room to say, with her fat chin in the air and a fine scorn in her tone: "Po' white man at de front do', comed to ast faw Mistoo Tregarbin."

Tregarvon obeyed the summons rather reluctantly and found Tryon on the veranda. The foreman had been running and was short of breath.

"You'd better come over—you an' Mr. Carfax," he broke out hurriedly. "We've done caught the dannymiter. He was aimin' to blow us all to kingdom come, this time!"

"Who is it?" Tregarvon grated.

Tryon wagged his head mysteriously. "Hit ain't Sawyer; hit's the same skunk I been

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a-suspicionin' ever sense we had that talk yister-day. You'll see when you get thar'."

Tregarvon went back to the drawing-room, meaning to cut Carfax out if possible without giving a general alarm. But Wilmerding overheard his whispered explanation to Carfax and so did Miss Wardwell; whereupon he spoke up quickly, briefing the story of the Ocoee troubles, and adding its latest sequel. The effect upon the master of Westwood House was instantaneous and militant.

"What's that, suh? Tryin' to dynamite yo-uh machinery whilst you and Mistuh Carfax are makin' us a friendly visit heah at Westwood House?" he demanded, his deep voice rumbling in the wrath of outraged hospitality. "Richa'dia, daughtuh, get me my coat and hat; I'm goin' oveh yondeh with these young gentlemen. No, Mistuh Tregarvon; don't deny me that privilege, suh; yo-uh bein' undeuh my roof at the precise moment makes yo-uh quarrel *my* quarrel, suh! You'll give me a seat in yo-uh steam-wagon, and—daughtuh, my coat and hat, immediately, if you please. And fetch me the old shot-gun, too, my deah."

By this time Wilmerding was declaring that he must not be left out; and in the momentary confusion Tregarvon saw that the judge's daughter,

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while she was obeying her father's commands, was pitifully agitated. Assuming that her anxiety was for her father's safety, he ventured a word of assurance while she was holding the overcoat for the sleeves of which the judge was hastily fumbling.

"You mustn't distress yourself—we are not going to let your father get hurt," he protested.

"It's—it's not that!" she gasped; "it is something far worse." Then, in an agonized whisper that he had to bend lower to hear: "This man they have taken; promise me that you will let him go before my—before any one else has seen him!"

Tregarvon promised blindly, striving to ignore this last of the maddening mysteries in an effort to be wholly loyal to the woman he loved. But as he committed himself the difficulties in the way of performance suddenly magnified themselves. With the judge taking part in the descent upon the scene of the capture, how was he to be kept from seeing and questioning the culprit? Tregarvon saw that he had promised that which he would most probably be unable to perform, but in the confusion of the hurried departure there was no chance to add the qualifying word, and it was left unspoken.

XXVII

Cloud-Wraiths

WITH Judge Birrell urging haste, the start for the burying-ground glade was made at once. Since Tregarvon's car was large enough to hold them all, Wilmerding's roadster was left behind. Carfax drove the touring-car, with Tryon clutching for handholds in the mechanician's seat beside him. This arrangement left the broad tonneau seat for the other three; and the judge, with the gun between his knees, sat in the middle. When the big car shot away with its loading the master of Westwood was still calling down maledictions upon the heads of those who would besmirch the fair fame of the Southland by resorting to the methods of the assassin and the anarchist.

"Who are these scoundrels, Mistuh Tregarvon?" he demanded. "Just name me thei-uh names, suh!" And then, with the charming inconsistency of his kind: "This is a law-abiding community, suh, and you have wronged us by keeping silence so long; you have, for a fact, suh! But

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now we shall vindicate ou'selves. A little taste of a rope and a tree limb for this grand rascal yo-uh men have caught will make him tell us the names of his confederates and accomplices; and then, by the Lord Harry, suh, we'll run these lawbreakuhs down with the dogs and hang them higheh than Haman!"

During the hurried cross-mountain run Tregarvon wrestled manfully with the problem thrust upon him by Richardia Birrell's whispered appeal. How was he to prevent a meeting between the judge and the as yet unnamed man whom Tryon and Rucker had captured? The query was still unanswered when the yellow car skidded and slued around the turn into the old wood road. Despite the promise given by a fair day and a measurably clear evening, the night had suddenly thickened, with cloud wracks flying low over the mountain top to wrap the forest in mantlings of fleecy vapor silver-shot by the rays of a gibbous moon, but opposing a wall of blank opacity to the headlamps of the car. Tregarvon would have welcomed help from the chapter of accidents, but now that they were off the main road there was a fair chance that the accident might be too destructive.

"Easy, Poictiers!—you'll scrap us if you don't

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look out!" he cautioned, leaning forward to warn Carfax, who was boring into the cloud bank at reckless speed.

The words were scarcely uttered before there came a crunching of dry tree limbs under the wheels, a hiss of escaping air, and a jolting stoppage of the car as the brakes were applied.

"Punctured!" exclaimed the cautioner, and they all got out to investigate cause and consequence. The obstruction proved to be what it had seemed—the dry limb of a tree—and the result was a flat tire.

"It is dead wood, and it may have fallen of its own accord; or it may mean that your dynamiter has friends who would like to delay us," Wilmerding offered. "On the bare chance, hadn't we better sprint along and not wait to change tires? Your man, Rucker, may easily be having the time of his life trying to hold on to his prisoner."

They sprinted accordingly, the judge taking the dog-trot as actively as his younger pace-setters, and stubbornly refusing to let Tregarvon relieve him of the burden of the heavy deer-gun. So running, they came in a few minutes to the site of the old burying-ground, and to the door of the tool-shanty. Rucker admitted them at Tregarvon's knock and call, and his report was

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brief and unenlightening. "No; nothin' doin' since we took him in—and the cuss won't talk. But maybe you can make him loosen up."

Tregarvon still saw no way of keeping the judge out of it, and he held himself absolved from his promise by the sheer impossibility of doing what Richardia had begged him to do. The captive, wrist-bound with a turn or two of cord, was sitting hunched upon the edge of Rucker's cot-bed. It was Carfax who picked up the lantern and flashed its light into the man's face. "By Jove!" he exclaimed; "Morgan McNabb!" and Rucker nodded.

Judge Birrell sat upon the spare coil of rope and wiped his face with his handkerchief. His hands were trembling and he was breathing hard, but the smart run from the disabled automobile might have accounted for these disturbances. When he spoke to the prisoner his tone was sternly accusing.

"So it's you, is it, Mo'gan McNabb?—turnin' yo-uh teeth upon the hand that's been feedin' you? By the Lord Harry, you make me mighty sorry that I once saved you from going to the penitentiary, where you belong! Now, then, open yo-uh mouth and tell these gentlemen why you come heah dynamitin' thei-uh machinery!"

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The mountaineer's lips were drawn back in a doglike snarl.

"I'll see 'em damned befo' I'll open my haid to 'em, now, Judge Birrell! Lookee at this yere," and he wrenched his tied hands around so that the judge might see.

"You don't like the rope?" said the judge evenly. "Listen to me, Mo'gan; you McNabbs have lived on Westwood land, father and son, for fo' generations, and you'll open yo-uh head to me, suh! What quarrel have you got with the owneh of the Ocoee property? Ansuh me, if you don't want anotheh tu'n o' that rope taken around yo-uh neck, suh!"

The answer was as prompt as it was disconcerting. "I allow I got thess the same sort o' quarrel ez you have, judge. Didn't they-all steal the Ocoee f 'om you in the first place?"

"That's neithuh heah nor there!" was the stern rejoinder. "Would you give these gentlemen to understand that *I* am yo-uh principal in these scandalous outrages? See heah, Mo'gan, we all know that you haven't been actin' on yo-uh own responsibility. Who has been puttin' you up to all these deviltries?"

"If you don't know, I reckon *I* ain't a-goin' to be the one to tell you," said the prisoner, relapsing

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into his former attitude of sullenness. Then, as if upon a second thought: "You ask Miss Dick, judge; I allow *she* knows."

The little pause of consternation which this statement precipitated was broken by an exclamation from Rucker.

"Look out yonder! Somebody's set the leaves afire! My God! we left the dynamite out there!"

Carfax, who was standing beside the mechanic, wheeled quickly to face the open door. Out beyond the drill derrick a thin line of fire, driven by the freshening west wind and showing orange-colored under the mist-wraiths, was sweeping down upon the clearing. "Show me where you left the stuff!" he snapped at the mechanic, but even as he spoke, a fuse squibbed and the thunder of a terrific explosion shattered the forest silences, the concussion smashing the glass in the small square window, rocking the lightly built tool-house like the heaving of an earthquake, and bombarding it an instant later with a rain of falling *débris*. The judge, sitting upon the coil of rope, was not thrown down, but the five men who were standing were flung in a heap on the floor.

Tregarvon was the first to regain his feet and to reach the open. The cloud mantlings had been

Cloud-Wraiths

thrust aside for the moment, but the air was full of gray dust and acrid with the fumes of the explosive. Where the derrick and the new power-plant had stood there was a mass of tangled wreckage, and the burying-ground glade looked as if it had been swept by a tornado. In the wan moonlight Tregarvon caught a glimpse of something moving under the trees beyond the wreck; then the moving object erected itself into the stature of a man.

One glance at the tall, frock-coated figure was enough. With a mad yell of rage, Tregarvon snatched the gun from the judge's hands and gave chase, calling to the frock-coated man to stand or he would shoot. There was an instant of hesitation, seemingly of indecision; then the man turned and fled. And, as if to favor him, another scudding cloud settled upon the mountain top, burying forest and glade, the tangled wreck and the two runners in its fleecy depths.

Tregarvon raced on for a breath-cutting space, guided solely by the crashing of the fugitive through the brier tangles and dry-leaf beds. Then he began to get his second wind, and again he shouted the command to halt. Since this seemed only to have the effect of hastening the thudding footsteps on ahead, he fired the gun, holding the

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muzzle high, as he thought and intended, but apparently not high enough, as the dreadful sequence immediately indicated. For, almost exactly coincident with the report of the gun, there was a shriek, the crash of a falling body, and silence.

At this the pursuer came down from the transporting heights of berserk rage with a shock that was sickening. "Oh, good Lord!" he gasped; "I've killed him!" Whereupon he flung the offending weapon afar and ran to confirm the horrifying conclusion.

He was still running in the direction from which the cry had come when the curious happening befell. As if the solid earth had been whisked away from beneath his feet he found himself whirling through empty space; falling through unfathomable depths of it, it seemed, before he collided with another world—a world of shocks and coruscating pains, of beatings and bruising, and presently of grateful forgetfulness.

XXVIII

The Ocoee's Answer

WHEN Tregarvon recovered consciousness he knew at once what had happened to him. In the blind and hurried search for the body of the man he had presumptively shot he had fallen from the cliff edge; how far was still problematical, but far enough, as a painful roaring in his ears, a tightening agony in his forehead, and a bruised and stiffening ankle sufficiently testified.

His first thought was for his victim. The man might not have been killed outright; in which case he might be even now dying for the lack of timely help. The thought was insupportable and Tregarvon tried to rise. But the ankle, broken or twisted, he could not determine which, gripped him like a fanged wild beast and he fell back with a groan. None the less, in some way he must contrive to bring help. He felt in his pockets for matches. A heap of dry leaves furnished the kindling and a clear flame leaped up, hollowing out a small cavity of yellow light in the

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misty gloom. At this the fire-lighter saw that he was at the bottom of a deep, water-worn cleft opening back from the outer scarp of the cliff, and at right angles to it; a ravine which was little more than a crevice, save that it was large enough to have trees and shrubs growing in it.

He knew the crevice, though he had never explored it. It lay at a point almost exactly halfway between the glade and the tramhead. Knowing that the sound would not carry upward and backward over the cliff, he did not waste his breath in vain shoutings. The alternative was a fire signal. If the cloud would but lift a little, and he could gather enough of the dry leaves to make a glow, the light would guide those who must certainly, by this time, be searching for him.

This was his thought while he was nursing the handful of fire and adding more leaves to it. The blaze rose higher and the cavity in the gloom grew larger until it became a hemisphere, with the black scarp of the crevice wall for its flattened side. A thickly matted vine covered the face of the precipice, completely concealing the perpendicular surface upon which it climbed. At its roots in the crevice bottom the dry leaves were bedded a foot deep. Tregarvon was reaching painfully for the mass of fresh fuel when the fire

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licked out and caught it first. There was a puff of dense smoke, a fierce blaze, and then the climbing vine took fire and was brightly outlined in a network of short-lived flame.

All this was normal enough, but what followed was curiously abnormal. As the fire glowed hotter small fragments of the cliff face began to split off, and these fragments, falling into the burning leaf-bed, sprang alight with hissings and sputterings and much pungent smoke. Tregarvon, ignoring the throbbing ankle, dragged himself an agonizing foot or so nearer and secured one of the splintered fragments. *It was coal!*

Almost beside himself with excitement, he heaped more leaves upon the fire. By the light of the fresh upblaze he could make out the upper line of the great coal seam. It was at the height of a tall man's head above the bottom of the cleft, well-defined, unmistakable; the roof shale of a vein fully six feet thick. Here, discovered in the moment of defeat, disaster, and woundings, was the Ocoee's lavish answer to all the costly questionings.

"My heavens!" gasped the discoverer; and a voice, apparently at his elbow, said: "Quite so; if the heavens may be purchased with the gifts of the earth. The gifts are yours, Mr. Tregarvon;

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first by the right of inheritance, and now by the right of discovery."

Tregarvon twisted himself into a sitting posture, gritting his teeth at the ankle's protest and holding his head in his hands. At a little distance away sat the professor of mathematics, one long leg jack-knifed for a support, and the other stretched awkwardly upon a makeshift cushion of the fallen leaves.

"You?" Tregarvon cried. "Did you fall over the cliff, too?"

"I think it was I who showed you the way," Hartridge amended. "You are a very apt pupil, Mr. Tregarvon. I was scarcely well down here before you played the part of Jill."

"Are you—are you hurt?"

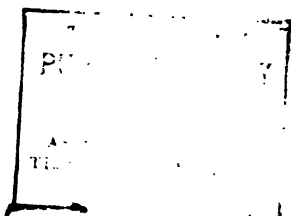
"Not by your shot-gun charge, happily; but my leg is broken. And you?"

Tregarvon winced. "I have a cracked skull, I think, and an ankle that won't let me get up. But about that gunshot; I didn't fire at you; I shot into the air to make you stop. Just the same, you gave me a quick fit of the horrors. When you yelled, I thought I had inadvertently killed you. What made you run?"

The professor's smile was a little rueful, and also a little shamefaced.



"My heavens!" gasped the discoverer; and a voice, apparently at his elbow, said: "Quite so."



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The Ocoee's Answer

"What made you chase me?" he asked.

"Because I was hot—fighting mad. I wanted to drag you to an accounting on the spot. I don't suppose you will be foolish enough to deny that you set the leaf fire that caused the explosion?"

"Since I was near enough to be blown up myself such a denial might have the weight of circumstantial evidence to support it," was the quiet reply. "But I do not make the denial. It was I who set the leaves afire. I shall be greatly relieved if you can tell me that nobody was injured."

"So far as I know the dynamite didn't kill any of us. But tell me, did you start that fire knowing that the explosion would follow?"

"By no means. I may confess that I knew the dynamite had been placed; but I supposed, as the most ordinary matter of course, that your men had taken care of it when they captured their prisoner."

"Then why did you light the fire?"

Again the quaint smile flitted across the face of the man who had always contrived to tell less than the sum total of all he knew.

"Once again, Mr. Tregarvon, you are going into the question of motives, which is a very large field, indeed. Let us say that I wished to make

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a diversion of some sort. Will that satisfy you?"

"No," was the blunt reply.

"I am sorry; I am afraid it will have to suffice for the present."

Tregarvon's head was throbbing so painfully that he found it next to impossible to think clearly. But he would not desist.

"Hartridge, it has come to a show-down between us. I'm giving you fair warning. Once I did you an injustice—or thought I did—but this time you've given yourself away. When I get up and around again, I'm going to sift this thing to the ultimate bottom and somebody will be made to sweat blood for what has been done tonight. As matters stand now, you seem to be the man the officers will want first."

Once more the professor smiled. "And yet you can't say that I have ever wittingly done anything to harm you," he offered mildly.

"That remains to be proved," was the angry retort. "Meaning to, or not meaning to, you fired that dynamite a little while back; and you certainly have never strained yourself in any effort to help me. You knew that this big vein was here—you have known it all along!"

"This time you are not my guest, Mr. Tregar-

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von, and I may contradict you without blame. I did not know it."

"Then why did you carve the Greek letter π on those two oak-trees below the glade? Or do you deny that, as well?"

"It is you who have found the value of π ," said the one who was under accusation. "I am ashamed to confess that it baffled me. Some three years ago, two strange surveyors acting, as I learned afterward, in the interests of Consolidated Coal, ran many lines over this property of yours, which was then practically abandoned. I had no access to their note-books, of course, so I was obliged to work out my conclusions as best I could from their stakes. One of these conclusions was that the true vein would be found somewhere in this locality. Can you believe me thus far?"

"I'm trying to," said Tregarvon. "Go on."

"It is humiliating to have to acknowledge that, while all the line-running on the part of these strangers pointed to this immediate locality, I could never discover the outcrop. True, I never thought of looking in this particular crevice. But to preserve a record for possible future investigation, I made the marks on the two trees. The distance between the oaks, carefully measured and multiplied by π , or three and the

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decimal one thousand, four hundred and sixteen, gives the distance around the cliff from the lower oak to the point somewhere below us where the intruding strangers drove their final stake."

Tregarvon heaped more leaves upon the fire, which was threatening to die out.

"You are still miles beyond my comprehension," he complained moodily. "On one hand, you stop at nothing to prevent me from finding out what you have just told me, and on the other you make what appears to be a very worthy and earnest effort to keep me from flinging myself into the maw of Consolidated Coal. How am I to reconcile such things?"

"When you are older, Mr. Tregarvon, and come to know human nature a little better, you will apprehend the truth of that worldly wise beatitude, 'Blessed are they who expect little, for, verily, they shall not be disappointed.' Consider a moment: you came here, the legal owner of the Ocoee, to be sure, and the innocent owner, inasmuch as your father was the unsuspecting purchaser of stolen goods. Yet you were none the less the legitimate successor of the bandit who had looted us. You wouldn't expect much from those who had been so ruthlessly defrauded, would you?"

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"Since I was not even constructively to blame, yes," Tregarvon insisted stubbornly. "Your motive went deeper than that."

"It did," the professor admitted gravely. "Almost from the first I saw the slight chance of a reward, the attainment of which has been the one thing desirable in a rather drab-colored life, slipping away from me; taken away from me in sheer wantonness, as it seemed, since, I had been given to understand, you were already pledged to marry Miss Wardwell. It was not in human nature to be entirely unresentful, Mr. Tregarvon."

"Oh; so that was it?" said Tregarvon shortly. Then: "What I saw yesterday afternoon in the forest back of Westwood House seems to prove that I am as far out of the running as you are with Judge Birrell's daughter."

The professor's face became, for the moment, a study in astoundment.

"Ah—yes," he said, stumbling over the words; and then: "I am to infer that you didn't recognize the young man whom you saw with Miss Richardia yesterday afternoon?"

"No; he was a stranger to me. Doesn't the judge approve of him?"

This time the professor's smile was rather grim.

"He does not—most decidedly."

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"But Richardia loves him; and that is enough—for you and for me."

"Assuredly she loves him—very loyally," was the grave reply; and a moment later, as if the mention of the judge had evoked a new train of thought: "I am curious to know if my leaf-fire diversion—which had such unlooked-for and disastrous results—came soon enough. How much had Morgan McNabb confessed?"

Tregarvon ignored the brow-wrinkling of pain which accompanied the question.

"I am beginning to believe that you are a very hardened criminal, Mr. Hartridge. If you know that McNabb had a confession to make, it follows that you were his accomplice."

The answer was a suppressed groan, for which the schoolmaster instantly apologized.

"You—you must forgive me if I say that I can't go into the matter of culpability with you just now. This leg—of mine—grows a bit insistent. But it will be the greatest possible satisfaction to me if you will answer my question."

"All right; you shall have it. Just before the explosion came McNabb had admitted that he was acting for somebody else."

"But he did not name the person?"

"The judge was trying to make him do so, but

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he was still refusing. The last thing he said, as I remember it, was something which seemed to implicate Miss Richardia as the one who could tell if she chose. Which was absurd, of course."

"Quite so," was the low-voiced reply. "Shall we let the matter rest there—for the present?"

Tregarvon was holding his head in his hands again. The throbbing pain was so intense that he could only grit his teeth and endure. When speech became possible he gave his answer.

"It may rest until I am able to take hold again. Then I shall make somebody pay for this night's work if it takes every dollar I can dig out of the Ocoee for the next ten years!"

Once more Hartridge bent in apparent agony over the broken leg. But when the paroxysm had passed he looked up with a face that was gray with a deeper suffering than that inflicted by the broken bone.

"If you do; if you strike back in the spirit of reprisal, which seems so justifiable to you now, you will carry the woundings of your own vindictiveness to your grave, Mr. Tregarvon," he said solemnly.

Tregarvon did not comment upon the sober prophecy. He was heaping more leaves upon the fire and wondering irritably why it was taking

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the rescuers so long to find them. The hammering agony in his head climaxed now at shorter intervals and the recurrences were blinding, but he contrived to keep the leaf glow alive until a welcome shout from the cliff above announced the presence of the searchers.

The hauling of the two injured men out of the deep cleft proved to be a difficult undertaking, this though there were five in the rescue party, which included the freed McNabb. Once it was done, a stretcher was quickly improvised for Hartridge, with Rucker, Tryon, and McNabb to take turns as bearers; and Tregarvon made shift to help himself a little, with Wilmerding and Carfax to shoulder him on either side.

On the slow progress back to the glade Tregarvon realized vaguely that his companions were gravely silent; and as the lagging procession issued from the wood he saw the cause. Rucker, or some one, had replaced the deflated tire and the motor-car had been brought upon the scene. The white glare of its headlamps focussed upon the open space in front of the tool-shanty. Judge Birrell, bowed and shrunken, was sitting upon the tool-house doorstep with his face hidden in his hands; and on Rucker's cot-bed, which had been placed under the light of the headlamps, lay

The Ocoee's Answer

the body of a man covered with one of the blankets.

"Who is it?" Tregarvon muttered, leaning more heavily upon his helpers.

He thought it singular that no one answered him, and the thought swiftly became an irritation too keen to be borne.

"What the devil is the matter with you all?" he rasped, with a curious idea that he had to shout to make his voice heard above the deafening thunder of many cataracts in his brain. Then, as in a dream, he seemed to hear Wilmerding saying to Carfax, almost savagely: "Ease him down and we'll carry him. Can't you see he's gone off his head?"

XXIX

Beyond the Gap

IT was a full fortnight before the Hesterville physician, driven at breakneck speed to Coalville in Wilmerding's roadster on the night of woundings, pronounced Tregarvon out of danger and in a fair way to recover from the broken head.

Whatever the lapse of time may have meant for others, it had little significance for the man who tossed and rolled in his bed in an upper room of the Ocoee office-building. Dim pictures there were of people coming and going; of grotesque attendants lifting him about, these sometimes parading as liveried Merkleys with Uncle William heads, or the reverse; of faces, affectionately sorrowful, hanging over him, now hopefully, and again with sharp anxiety in eyes which were never completely recognizable.

But for the greater interval, what with thundering brain cataracts to attend to, and a thousand dancing lights which had to be wheeled in vanishing spirals, checked, stopped, and wheeled the other way around precisely three hundred twirls

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a minute, he was so pressed for time as not to be aware of the lapse of it. Hence, when he finally opened eyes of full consciousness upon the walls and ceiling of the familiar room, he was sadly out of touch, his latest clear recollection being of a cloud-banked night, of a glade in the mountain-top forest, and of two great white eyes of artificial light staring down upon a cot-bed bier supporting a blanketed body.

At first he thought he was alone in the bare-walled upper room, but at his earliest conscious stirring Carfax came to stand beside the bed.

"That's better—much better!" said the golden one, noting the turning-point improvement at once. "You certainly had us guessing, old man. Our only comfort has been in the fact that you could eat and didn't seem to be losing too much flesh. Have the wheels stopped buzzing?"

"They weren't wheels; they were lights and waterfalls," said the sick man meticulously.

"All right; call 'em anything you like, so long as they're gone. We had one doctor, a specialist from Nashville, who gave us a fit of seasickness; said you'd live, and be all right physically, but that you would most probably never recover your reason. Nice cheerful prospect for the friends and relatives, wasn't it?"

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"How long have I been knocked out, Poictiers?"

"Two solid weeks."

"My mother and sister—has anybody written them?"

"Sure! Elizabeth has been writing them every day or so. They wanted to come down, of course, but we decided that it wasn't best. You were getting all the care you could stand."

"Then Elizabeth hasn't gone home?"

"Not yet. Her father and mother have gone to Florida, and she has been staying on at Westwood House—what time she hasn't been down here coddling you. She's an angel, Vance; one of the kind you read about. But I mustn't let you talk too much."

"If I can't talk, you'll have to. Have you made it up with Elizabeth—about that silly side-play of yours with Richardia?"

Carfax's smile began on the cherubic lines but it ended in a mere face-wrinkling of soberness.

"We have had too much else to think about; too many little diversions, as you might say. But I'm hoping she isn't going to insist upon making a horrible example of me for my apparent fickleness."

"Too many little diversions'," Tregarvon

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echoed. "That reminds me: I can remember you and the others pulling us out of the crevice—Hartridge and me—and after that, a stretcher was made for Hartridge and we used up an age or so getting back to the glade. Am I right, so far?"

"It was something like that; yes."

"And when we came into the old burying-ground the motor-car had been run down opposite the tool-house, and its headlamps made everything look ghastly. The judge was sitting on the door-step with his face hidden in his hands, and Rucker's cot was standing in the open under the lights with a blanketed corpse lying upon it. Who was the dead man, Poictiers?"

Carfax shook his head. "Call it a bad dream," he said soothingly. "The cracked skull was beginning to get in its work. You didn't see any dead man."

Tregarvon closed his eyes wearily. "It's passing strange how a little knock on the head can mix things. I could swear that I saw the judge and the dead man and the car just as I have described them. Let it go, and tell me about Richardia."

Carfax seemed suddenly embarrassed. "I—I don't know as there is much to tell," he stammered. "She—she is well, I believe."

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Tregarvon raised himself on an elbow.

"You're keeping something back," he protested. "Is she—is she—married?"

"Oh, no; nothing of that sort," was the hasty reply. "She has been here to see you—she and her father—quite often; that is, as often as possible. I have fetched them in the car, you know. They have left nothing undone that could be done."

Tregarvon still felt the presence of a reservation; of many of them; but he was too weak to fight for the clearer explication.

"How is Hartridge getting along?" he asked, sinking back upon the pillows.

"Rather slowly. It was a bad fracture. But the doctor says he won't be a cripple."

"That's good. I want him to get well so that I can drag him into court. He set the leaf fire that blew us up. Did you know that?"

The golden youth nodded gravely. "I know a good many things that I didn't know before you got your knockout."

"Bring me down to date," said the sick man impatiently. "What have you done about the mine?"

Carfax seemed to welcome the change to the more material field.

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"Any number of things," he answered cheerfully. "In the first place we—the judge and I—swore everybody to secrecy on that Monday night of smashing catastrophes, and the secret has been kept from the world at large, and from Consolidated Coal in particular. The wrecked drilling plant has been left just as it was; your laboring force has been discharged; and the impression has been given that if you ever recovered your wits, you'd go straight away back to Philadelphia, a sadder and much wiser young man."

"Fine!" approved the listener. "But that isn't all?"

"Not by a jugful. Two days after you were hurt, Wilmerding resigned from the C. C. & I. service and disappeared. He has been North buying machinery and material and shipping it in as far as Hesterville by littles. The explanation given and accepted is that a new company has been formed to develop some coal lands in the Hesterville vicinity, and the C. C. & I. people are running around in circles and uttering loud cries in their effort to find out where the lands are and who is going to develop them."

"Good!—ripping good!" the sick man applauded.

"We have been only waiting for you to get

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upon your feet, and we didn't wish to give Thaxter and his backers any chance to tangle things for you in the meantime. The moment you are able to take hold you will find everything in train—material and machinery where you can rush it in with motor-trucks, labor all engaged, coke-burners from Pennsylvania ready to take the first train south, and all that.”

Tregarvon doubled the pillows under his head and his eyes were flashing. “Poitiers, you’re a miracle!” he declared.

The professional idler smiled his denial. “I didn’t do any of it. I merely stood aside and told the others to go ahead and we’d pay the bills. Wilmerding was fully competent to take charge of the business part of it, and I have retained old Captain Duncan for the engineering. All you have to do now is to rise up and say the word, and you’ll have a mine that will make the Whitlow proposition compare accurately with a last year’s almanac.”

Tregarvon closed his eyes again and kept them closed so long as to give the impression that he had fallen asleep. But when Carfax was about to tiptoe away the heavy-lidded eyes opened.

“I’ll build upon the foundation you have laid, Poitiers; you and Wilmerding and Duncan.

Beyond the Gap

There are three things that I mean to do before I quit and go West to look for another job: to stand the Ocoee upon its feet as a paying proposition, to make provision for my mother and sister with a part of the property and to divide the remainder equitably among those who were frozen out in the Parker robbery, and after this is done to turn heaven and earth over until I have found and punished the man or men who have tried so hard to smash me. When I've squared up I'll vanish."

Carfax laid a hand as slender and shapely as a woman's upon the hot forehead. "I've let you talk too much and you are getting the 'wheels' again," he said gently. "You mustn't be vindictive; and there is no reason on earth why you should talk of throwing things up and running away."

"There are good reasons for both," was the stubborn insistence. "I owe it to common justice, no less than to myself, to dig up the criminal or criminals and bring them to book. If they should prove to be Thaxter and his backers, after all, the world needs the example; and if it was pure outlawry on the part of the McNabbs and Hartridge and some other scoundrel that McNabb wouldn't name there is all the more reason why

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I should send for the best detectives the country affords and run the outlaws down. And as to running away after it is all over, that says itself, Poitiers. I couldn't stay on here after Richardia is married to another man. It isn't in human nature. Now go away and let me sleep. I want to hurry and get well, so that I can stand up and straighten things out."

XXX

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THE small world of Coalville, centring socially under Tait's store porch, had its vivifying shock when it awoke one morning to find that in a single night, as one might say, the entire face of nature had changed for the sleepy little hamlet at the foot of old Pisgah. In the instant of transformation the Ocoee of many disappointments had suddenly leaped into the foreground as a coal discovery of unlimited possibilities; an army of workmen was massing to shift the old tramway to the new opening; motor-trucks, piled high with material, were trundling over the valley pike from Hesterville; carpenters were rushing up new buildings at top speed; and at the centre of all these stirring activities, directing and driving them, was the young man whom rumor had been bulletining as dead or dying in his room on the second floor of the old office-building, or at best destined to pass the remainder of his life in an asylum.

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Taking one thing with another, the gossips at Tait's found it difficult to recognize the convalescent Tregarvon. The brief period of his illness had seemed to mature him curiously; to make him a man of a single idea—the idea being to turn the Ocoee into a producing industry in the shortest possible time. Also, they missed the genial and mollifying influence of the young New York millionaire, who, though still nominally an inmate of the Ocoee headquarters building, spent most of his time on the mountain, presumably as a guest of the Caswells.

As it chanced, the store-porch gossips were not the only persons who were finding a changed Tregarvon sitting at the desk of overlordship in the hastily remodelled Ocoee office-building. There were others, among them Barnby, travelling freight agent for the railroad, who had come all the way from his own headquarters to find out why the Ocoee was hauling its new material from Hesterville in motor-trucks.

"You will find the reason in the correspondence files of your general office," was the curt reply of the Ocoee organizer. "I asked for a rate from Hesterville to Coalville on the material and was told that the shortage of cars would make it impossible for your road to handle the freight save

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as it might be transported a little at a time by the daily way-train. I don't propose to be held up by a railroad company, the policy of which seems to be dictated by the C. C. & I., Mr. Barnby."

Barnby was a fleshy young man with an easy smile, and he gave the smile its blandishing opportunity.

"You will have to ship your product out over our road when you get in operation, won't you?" he asked mildly.

"Not necessarily. We have all the capital we need, and if you don't give us an equal show with the C. C. & I. we shall build a ten-mile industrial track, for which we have already secured a right of way, to a connection with the South Central at Midvale. It's up to your people. Talk it over with them when you go back to headquarters. Glad to have met you. Drop in again when you are going over the line. Good morning."

Touching this intimation that the coal trust had already begun a new series of impeding activities, speculation was rife. Some said that the C. C. & I. would buy the new mine, lock, stock, and barrel, and close it; others hinted that the trust would put the price of coke so low that the new company would be bankrupted in short

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order; still others suggested that Consolidated Coal would conspire with the railroad and call Tregarvon's bluff to build the industrial cut-off.

Wilmerding or Duncan, or both of them, brought these rumors to Tregarvon, and were amazed to find that he refused to be either disturbed or greatly interested. In many ways the superintendent and the old Scotch engineer were discovering daily that they had to do with a man who had developed suddenly into a master of himself and others. The light-hearted young fellow who had thrown himself so joyously into the fray at the beginning had given place to a modern captain of industry, alert, strong-willed, a bit dictatorial, perhaps, but entirely capable.

"Never mind what the C. C. & I. is doing, or will try to do," he told his oddly assorted lieutenants. "Our job is to get the mine open and the ovens fired. Consolidated Coal will neither buy us nor break us, nor force us to build a railroad to Midvale. I'll take care of all those details at the proper time."

It was on the day when the first tram loads of Ocoee coal were coming down the mountain to be dumped into the oven-filling hoppers that another caller discovered the new Tregarvon. Late in the afternoon a neat, rubber-tired buggy, drawn

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by a black Hambletonian, stopped in front of the Ocoee office-building, and a round-bodied little man descended and hitched the horse.

Somewhat to his chagrin, it may be supposed, Mr. Onias Thaxter was allowed to cool his heels for a full quarter of an hour in the outer office before he was admitted to the presence of the new overlord; and the waiting was doubtless the harder to endure since he came bearing the olive-branch of peace. Tregarvon sat back in his chair and listened coldly while the peace branch was getting itself waved to an accompaniment of placative speech.

"There is no such thing as personal vindictiveness in business, Mr. Tregarvon," was the summing up of the Thaxter argument. "Without admitting it as a fact, let us assume, for the moment, that the man Sawyer was employed as a sort of scout for our people. This is a thing that is done every day; it's business, and good business. You might do it yourself, if you had a competitor. We are hearing it asserted here and there and everywhere that you are charging us with a lot of outlawry with which we had nothing to do, and that you are going to press the charges in the courts. Will you pardon me if I say that that isn't playing the game?"

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"You may say anything you wish to say, if you will only make it sufficiently brief," was the discouraging rejoinder.

"I have already made my suggestion. It must be evident to you that a consolidation of interests with us is by far the most sensible plan you can adopt. You can hardly hope to do business here, as an independent coal operator, in the heart of a region which we have developed. There would be constant friction; in the market, with your labor, with the transportation companies. I am not authorized to make a definite proposal, but if you will organize your new company on a conservative basis with a modest capitalization, I feel sure that our people would take you in as a subsidiary, share for share at par value."

"Are you quite through?" asked the new Tregarvon, when the emissary paused to take breath. "If you are, you may have my answer in one word—No."

"I am sure you are deciding too hastily, and because you haven't given the plan sufficient thought. As I have pointed out, there is no such thing as vindictiveness in business; but when you deliberately set up that standard for yourself, you mustn't expect the other fellow to lie down and let you run the truck-wheels over him."

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"By which you mean that if I refuse to let you swallow me peaceably, you will do it the other way?"

"That is your own deduction—not mine," said the bookkeeper in the tone of one trying to soothe a wayward child.

"Then listen to me, Mr. Thaxter. Some scoundrels—possibly you and your people—have harried me like a lot of pirates. Nothing has been left undone in the effort either to swindle me out of my property on the one hand, or to force me out of it on the other. But now the shoe is on the other foot"—he was leaning across the corner of the desk and emphasizing the words with a clenched fist beating softly upon the oak—"we have Sawyer where we can make him talk. We know that he can implicate you, individually, in one of the criminalities; and perhaps he can tell us something about the others. Mr. Thaxter, I am going to sift these bushwhackings to the bottom, and you know best whether or not you or the combination you represent can afford to heap more fuel on the fire now by fighting me in the manner you have suggested. That is all I have to say, I believe, and I shall have to ask you to excuse me. This is my busy day."

In the early evening of the fourth day after

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Thaxter's visit, Carfax made one of his infrequent descents of the mountain, driving a ridiculously high-priced car, the purchasing of which had been his latest extravagance. The coke-ovens in the long rank were aglow with the fires of the initial charging, and the air of the valley was murky with the smoke of the new industry. Wilmerding and Duncan were at the mine, and Tregarvon had just finished his dinner when Carfax entered the dining-room.

"You do turn up once in a while, don't you?" said the solitary diner not too hospitably. "You're late for dinner, but doubtless Uncle William can find you something. You will have to eat alone. I have some work to do."

Carfax followed the worker into the front office and, when the lights were turned on, dropped into a chair.

"I don't want any dinner," he said. "Or rather I should say, I'm due to show up at Mrs. Caswell's at the proper dinner-hour."

Tregarvon had a telegraph pad under his hand and he took time to write a brief message before he said, half-absently: "We keep working-men's hours here."

"Which is a delicate way of intimating that I'd better go chase myself and quit bothering

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you?" put in the intruder with a gentle chuckle. "All right; I'll vanish presently. But first I'd like to ask if you are still clinging to your fantastic idea of making somebody suffer for the dynamiting?"

"I am; and I don't see anything fantastic about it. A number of crimes have been committed, and I have no notion of compounding a felony by letting the perpetrators get away. Morgan McNabb is the key to the situation, and I have never understood why you and Judge Birrell turned him loose and gave him a chance to disappear. It has cost me a pretty penny to trace him, but I've got him now. He is under arrest in Dallas, Texas."

"And you are going to have him brought back and given the third degree?"

"Precisely. I have just written the telegram."

Carfax was feeling in his pockets for his cigarette-case, going about it leisurely as one who would gain time.

"McNabb is only a poor devil of a mountaineer, too ignorant to be held fully accountable, don't you think?" he ventured at the match-lighting.

"That may be. But he knows the real criminal or criminals who employed him. I've been an easy mark all my life, Poitiers, but that is a

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thing of the past now. I've turned over a new leaf."

The golden youth was blowing delicate little smoke rings at the ceiling.

"So you have, and the new leaf isn't as pleasant reading as some of the old ones, Vance," he commented, speaking slowly and without a trace of the lisp. "Some of the things you are writing down on it are rather sordid, don't you think? You are a bigger man in some ways, and a much smaller one in some others."

"'Faithful are the wounds of a friend,'" quoted the one under criticism with a short laugh. "Suppose you elucidate."

"I will. Up to the time of your father's death you were as much of a *flâneur* as I've always been. You didn't have to ask for your blessings; you merely reached out and took them—if they didn't happen to be handed you on a silver platter. During the past few months you've been chucked up against life as it really is for the greater part of mankind; a fight, a frantic scramble for a foothold. You've made the fight, because you have the good old Cornish fighting blood in you; but while you have been growing on one side you have been shrinking on the other."

"Go on."

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"Real magnanimity was one of the strongest and most lovable qualities of the man you've put off; you've lost it completely. Cheerful optimism was one of the other good points, and you've dropped it. Just now you are planning first to get square with your enemies, and next to shirk your responsibilities by effacing yourself. What have you done about the new incorporation?"

"I have done exactly what I told you I should. The new company is formed, and the papers for the division of the capital stock are prepared. I am looking for Peters, the family lawyer, on every train, and when he comes the deal will be closed."

"You tried to tell me the other day what the property arrangement is to be, but I didn't get it very clearly fixed in my mind," Carfax offered.

"It is simple. Since you say you don't want any of the stock, you will be reimbursed for your cash advances out of the first money earned by the mine. The stock is to be divided, sixty per cent to my mother and sister and forty to Judge Birrell for distribution among the original minority stockholders who were swindled out of their holdings by Parker."

"Parker," said Carfax musingly. "He will never swindle any more. Did I tell you? I read

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an item in the *New York Times*. Parker was found dead at his desk in his Broad Street office one day last week." Then he came back to the matter in hand. "Where do you come in, in the property distribution?"

"I don't come in; I go out. Wilmerding and Duncan can operate the mine, and I shan't be needed. I shall go West and try for an engineering job in one of the gold camps."

"But not before you have had your revenge upon the dynamiters?"

"No; I shall stay long enough to see that part of it through to a finish."

"You are proving my contention very handsomely, don't you think?" said the critic quietly; "that you are bigger in some ways and smaller in others? You are telling yourself that this generous thing you are going to do is perfectly magnanimous, and that you are merely raising the magnanimity to the *nth* power by conserving the ends of pure justice in the prosecution part of it, and by obliterating yourself afterward. But, really, at the bottom of it all there are two rather dismal motives. You want your revenge, and you wish to show the woman in the case that you can turn your back upon her without half trying. Isn't that true?"

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Tregarvon's grin bordered upon the saturnine. "It's next to impossible to resent anything you choose to say, Poictiers; that is your one little gift—to be able to flay your friends without getting yourself disliked. Let's talk of something else. How long is Elizabeth going to stay at Judge Birrell's?"

This time the golden youth was able to call up the cherubic smile in all its glory.

"Not very much longer now. She, too, is going West."

"What? Elizabeth? You don't know her as well as I do. Her 'West' begins and ends at the summit of the Alleghenies."

"Nevertheless, she is planning to make the grand tour—in a private car."

Tregarvon reached suddenly across the corner of the table-desk and grasped the hand of many helpings.

"There is enough of the old Vance Tregarvon left in me to wish you all the joy there is in the world, Poictiers!" he exclaimed, with some touch of the old-time heartiness. "You two were made for each other; I can see it now."

"You are quite sure there aren't any inward daggerings behind that, Vance?" said the successful one half wistfully.

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"Not in the least. I'm glad. If you or Elizabeth had only told me at first who the other fellow was . . . but it is all right now. How did you contrive to persuade her to overlook your bit of play-acting with Richardia?"

The persuader shook his head. "That part of it was pretty serious. It was one of the things that couldn't very well be explained in cold words. I think Miss Richardia has helped out some. She knew well enough what I did it for."

"You didn't do it for me," Tregarvon interposed bluntly.

"Not at all," was the quiet rejoinder. "As I have said before, I assumed most naturally that Elizabeth's happiness was involved, and I didn't propose to stand by and see you make ducks and drakes of it if I could help it."

"Never mind; it's all over now, and you two at least are in a fair way to get what is coming to you. How is Hartridge getting along by this time?"

"Quite well. He is walking with a crutch, and is able to hear his classes." So much Carfax said in the matter-of-fact manner of one who answers a commonplace categorically. Then he sat up suddenly and snapped his fingers, and the lisping drawl had returned when he went on: "By Jove I

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that reminds me, don't you know. Hartridge would like to see you."

"Why does he wish to see me?"

Carfax spread his hands. "My dear boy, I'm no mind-reader. But I'm sure it's rather urgent. Will you go?"

Tregarvon sat frowning down upon the papers on the desk for a full half-minute before he looked up to say: "I can't go, Poitiers. I don't care especially to meet Hartridge, or to listen to the begging-off plea which he is probably going to make. He as good as told me that he was jealous, and was trying to get square. Besides, I haven't seen Richardia since this mad-work whirl began, and—and it will be easier for me if I don't see her again."

Carfax had his answer ready. "You'll not meet Richardia at Highmount. Elizabeth is staying with the Caswells for a few days, and Richardia went home to Westwood House at three o'clock. I know, because I drove her in my car. Hartridge has his rooms in the laboratory building, and you needn't show up at the president's house at all if you don't wish to."

Tregarvon hesitated a moment and then glanced at his watch.

"I'll go—a little later," he decided abruptly.

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"I don't know that I owe the professor anything but an action at law for helping to destroy my drilling plant, but I'll give him a chance to say what he has to say. Now run along and keep your dinner engagement. I can drive up in my own car when I am ready."

"About what time will that be?" queried Carfax, hanging upon the threshold of the door of leave-takings. "I ought to let Hartridge know when to expect you."

Again Tregarvon looked at his watch. "Say eight o'clock. Will that do?"

"Perfectly, I should think." It was the golden youth's cue to disappear, but still he lingered. "That telegram you have just written, Vance; are you going to send it to-night?"

Tregarvon answered without looking up. "Certainly. And to-morrow I shall notify the sheriff to send a deputy after McNabb."

Carfax went out, closing the door softly behind him. But when the big expensive motor-car had cut its half-circle to head toward the mountain pike it was brought to a stand at the railroad station, and the driver left it for a minute or two while he had speech through the ticket-window with Orcutt, the night telegraph operator. Daddy Layne, with nothing better to do, was warming

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his shins at the waiting-room stove, and though he listened, after the manner of his kind, he caught only one sentence of the low-toned talk. That was Orcutt's, spoken after Layne's keen old eyes had glimpsed the passing of something that looked like a yellow-backed bank-note through the window. "It'll be as much as my job's worth, Mr. Carfax, but I'll do it."

A half-hour later, while Layne was dozing in a corner of the superheated waiting-room, Tregarvon came in with his message to the Dallas chief of police. This time there was no effort made to keep the talk from being overheard.

"I'm mighty sorry, Mr. Tregarvon, but I can't get it off to-night," was the operator's deprecatory protest when the message was handed in. "The commercial wires are grounded—been that way all the evening. Mighty sorry, but these things will happen once in a while. Yes; sure! first thing in the morning, if I have to put it through the despatcher's office. Good night."

XXXI

On Pisgah's Height

PROFESSOR William Wilberforce Hartridge was reading before the cheerful grate fire in his sitting-room when his visitor was brought up by the old negro janitor.

"Come in, Mr. Tregarvon, and be at home," he said, rising, with the aid of his crutch, for the welcoming, and making difficult work of it. "Draw your chair to the fire and be comfortable. It was kind of you to——"

"Carfax brought me your message," Tregarvon interrupted, rather more brusquely than he meant to. "In a certain sense I suppose I am responsible for your present condition, and since you wished to see me——"

"Ah, yes; but I didn't wish to give myself the opportunity of reproaching you for the accident, I assure you," was the deprecatory rejoinder. "You were not even constructively to blame for my cowardly legs." Then he added, with a touch of naïve humor: "I trust they have sufficiently learned their lesson."

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"You are having a pretty long siege of it," Tregarvon offered, finding himself sympathizing where he had meant to be coldly self-contained.

"Old bones," returned the schoolmaster, with his quaint smile. "They haven't knitted quite as rapidly as they might. But let us hope that there is nothing worse than broken bones in store for any of us. May I be very frank with you, Mr. Tregarvon?"

"I shall set you the example. I can conceive of only one reason why you should wish to see me, Mr. Hartridge. You have been told that I am still determined to exact an eye for an eye in the matter of bringing certain criminals to justice, and you would like to forestall your arrest as an accessory. Am I right?"

At this the quaint smile became quizzical. "Partly; but only partly. Have you taken any steps as yet?"

"I have. After a good bit of trouble and expense I have at last succeeded in tracing the man Morgan McNabb. He is under arrest in Dallas, Texas, and I shall have him brought back as soon as the necessary papers can be obtained."

"And your object in bringing him back?"

"Is to make him give the name of the man who hired him to put the dynamite under my drilling

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plant. That man is going to the penitentiary, Mr. Hartridge, if any effort of mine can send him there."

The schoolmaster removed his spectacles to polish them, and for a time sat staring with unshielded eyes into the heart of the coal fire in the grate.

"You have all the precedents on your side," he admitted at length. "It is your right to prosecute if you choose to do so. Yet I venture to predict that you will be exceedingly sorry if you bring Morgan McNabb to Tennessee and extort his confession—a confession which will necessarily be made public. Besides, there is a much easier way in which you can apprehend his principal."

"Are you willing to indicate the way?" snapped Tregarvon.

"Not altogether willing; no. You are at heart a much flintier young man than you appeared to be when we first met, Mr. Tregarvon. It is an inheritance from some one of your Cornish forebears, I imagine. But I have allowed myself to be overpersuaded. You have your car here?"

"Yes."

"I shall ask you to drive me. Will you trust me that far?"

Tregarvon rose, smiling grimly. "I shall have

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you for my hostage. If you are about to have me ambushed, I shall make you share my risk. Do we go at once?"

Hartridge limped to a closet and found his overcoat, and Tregarvon helped him to put it on. Then he gave the temporary cripple an arm through the laboratory corridor and down the stair. At the steps he lifted Hartridge bodily into the mechanician's seat of the car. As yet there had been no hint given of their destination, but when he took his place behind the wheel Tregarvon asked for driving directions.

"Westward, on the cross-mountain road," was the brief reply, and no other word was exchanged until the swiftly driven machine was approaching the intersection of the cross-road with the west-brow pike. Then Hartridge said: "To your left," and Tregarvon had a sudden sinking of the heart. A mile away he could see the lights of Westwood House, and a great fear rose up to unsteady his hand as he made the turn out of the cross-road.

Tregarvon's fear was realized in some measure when, at Hartridge's direction, the car made a second left-hand turn into the Westwood grounds and was brought to a stand before the door of the old mansion. "I have obeyed you blindly thus far," he said, as he was lifting Hartridge out of

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the car. "But now you must tell me. Is it Judge Birrell?"

"Wait," said the schoolmaster, and Tregarvon helped the lame man up the steps and steadied him while he groped for the knocker. Before he could knock, the door opened silently under the hand of the judge's daughter, and Tregarvon again gave Hartridge an arm to help him over the threshold.

Though the hall was but dimly lighted he saw at once that there had been a pitiful change in Richardia. There was the shadow of a deep grief in her eyes when she greeted him, and the hand that she gave him was nerveless and cold. He had never seen her in black before, and that, and the chill of the great hall and the grave silence of his car companion, made him feel as if he had entered a house of mourning.

Without a word in explanation the changed Richardia led him to the stair and signed to him to precede her. Tregarvon hesitated only long enough to see that the professor was hobbling away toward the lighted library. Then he stood aside and slipped an arm under Richardia's. "They hadn't told me you had been ill," he said reproachfully; and as they went up together the nearness of her set his blood afire and for the

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moment he forgot the scene in the deep wood timing itself in the Sunday afternoon of revelation.

At the stairhead a door stood ajar, with the flickering light of an open fire in the room beyond shining through the narrow opening. With a quick premonition that a tragedy was about to be revealed, Tregarvon followed his guide into the room. It was a huge chamber, spacious enough to belittle the few pieces of old-fashioned furnishings, and in the great four-poster bed lay a young man with an arm in a sling and his bandaged head propped high among the pillows. Though the face of the sick man was haggard and emaciated, Tregarvon recognized it instantly. It was the face of the handsome young fellow who had kept the Sunday afternoon tryst with Richardia.

It was only natural that he should be checked by a sudden feeling of antagonism, but before it could find expression it was swallowed up in an astoundment too great to be measured. Richardia had led him to the bedside and she was saying quietly: "Mr. Tregarvon has come, brother. Shall I leave him alone with you?"

The sick man roused himself with an effort that was plainly distressful. "Yes," he said

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shortly. And after Richardia had gone: "I'm the man you're looking for."

Tregarvon dragged a chair to the bedside and sat down. In the rush of conflicting emotions one exultant fact was hammering itself into his brain and dominating all others: Richardia's secret had not been her lover's secret; it was her *brother's*. In the turmoil of readjustment, it was inevitable that the generous impulses of former days—the days before the *débâcle*—should come swiftly to the surface.

"I'm glad to be here, Mr. Birrell; and that is entirely apart from anything you may be going to tell me," he said quickly. "Are you quite sure you are able to talk?"

"I've got to talk; it's up to me now. Sister told me a little while ago that you had caught Morgan McNabb; that you're going to have him brought back here so that you can give him the third degree. I'm the man you want. Morgan did only what I made him do."

Tregarvon was beginning to understand a little. "Perhaps you'd better tell it all, if you feel equal to it," he suggested soberly. Then he added: "I'm not going to be your judge, Mr. Birrell."

The sick man rocked his head on the pillows.

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"You won't understand; I couldn't make anybody understand. But it's got to be told. Do you know what that crook Parker did to my father?"

"Yes."

"All of it?"

"Yes; all of it."

"Well, it made a devil of me. I was only a kid then, but it seemed as if I grew to be a man between two days. I tried to kill Parker. Maybe you know that, too."

"Yes; I have heard about it."

"He didn't die; and he spent his money like water until he got me indicted. Then I broke my father's heart by showing the yellow streak—running away. I've been hid out down in Arizona ever since, but I always meant to come back and stand the gaff some day."

"Go on," said Tregarvon gravely.

"I didn't come back by the railroad. The yellow streak showed up again, and I dodged the sheriff by walking in over the mountain from Piketown. The McNabbs hid me out in the 'Pocket.' They told me you were Parker's man, and that you had come to finish what he'd begun. Afterward they told me you were making love to my sister, and that settled it."

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"I see," said Tregarvon. Then: "Why didn't you come out in the open like a man and find out a few things for yourself?"

"I couldn't. The indictment was still hanging over me; as it is yet. And I was crazy mad. I swore I'd run you out of the country or kill you if you didn't go. I made Morgan McNabb help me. He'd been mixed up in a feud years ago and had ambushed a man, and I was the only one who knew it. I told him I'd give him away if he didn't help me run you off."

"Your sister knew you had come back?"

"Yes; but she didn't know anything else. She thought I was afraid to show myself on account of the old trouble—as I was. She was trying to fix things so that I could come back here to my father and Westwood House. I did come, but they brought me on a stretcher. Somebody set the leaves afire that night in the old negro burying-ground, and the dynamite went off and caught me while I was trying to stamp the fire out. The jig's up now. All you've got to do is to send for the sheriff."

Tregarvon saw that it was time to intervene. The sick man's breath was coming in gasps and his face was livid.

"You mustn't try to talk any more now," he

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said, rising and taking the thin hand that was so much like Richardia's in his own. "For a good many reasons you have nothing to fear from me. Of course, you know now that I am in no sense Parker's representative. So far from it, the papers are already drawn which will restore to your father and his friends the property that Parker stole from them. I meant to do that from the first, if I should be lucky enough to find the coal."

The grip of the thin fingers tightened upon the hand of reassurance. "My God!" breathed the prodigal, "and I've been trying to kill you! Mr. Tregarvon, can you go one step farther and—and turn Morgan McNabb loose? That's what made me frame it up with sister and Hart-ridge and Mr. Carfax to bring you here to-night."

"McNabb will not be brought back; I promise you that. Shall I send your sister up to you?"

"Not—not right now; tell her to play something; something low and soft that'll make the devil let me alone. I want to think. I—I reckon I'm willing to go to the convict camps now for trying to square up with Parker; I reckon I *ought* to go!"

Tregarvon went out softly, closing the door behind him and groping his way down the stair.

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Richardia was waiting for him in the hall below, as he hoped she would be, and she led him across to the drawing-room where there were lights and a wood-fire purring and crackling in the big stone fireplace.

"Tell me," she entreated.

"There is nothing to tell—nothing that you haven't already guessed. I am completely disarmed, as you knew I would be. I have assured your brother that he has nothing to fear from me."

"It has been very dreadful," she said, moving aside to hold her hands out to the fire.

"How badly was he hurt in the explosion?"

"So badly that it is only within the past few days that we have dared to hope. Mr. Carfax hasn't told you?"

"Not a word. Your secret has been guarded very carefully."

"But now it is a secret no longer. If he gets well it will only be to face a trial for the attempt upon Mr. Parker's life."

"Nothing will come of that," Tregarvon predicted confidently. "Parker is dead; he died suddenly in his New York office a few days ago. And no twelve Tennesseans could ever be found who would convict your brother for trying to avenge his father's wrongs."

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"We are your poor debtors—all of us," she went on. "You are heaping coals of fire on our heads, and—and they *burn!* Of course, you know now that I was my brother's accomplice?"

"I know nothing of the sort; of course, you were not!"

"But I was—in a way. All along, I feared that it was he who was making, or at least planning, all the trouble you were having. He was *so* bitter!"

Tregarvon nodded complete comprehension. "I knew you were anxious about somebody; I thought, at first, that it was Hartridge, and later that it was your father. You have had a heavy burden to carry; and I have been doing what I could to make it heavier."

"You have," she said quite frankly.

He did not affect to misunderstand.

"You knew all the time that Poitiers and Elizabeth were held apart only by Elizabeth's engagement to me?"

"I guessed it. But that didn't excuse you for—for——"

"For making love to you? I know it didn't. But I had my punishment the Sunday afternoon when you met your brother in the wood above the 'Pocket.' I had gone out to meet Hartridge, and I saw you two together. I took it for granted that

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the man was your lover who, for some reason, couldn't come here to Westwood House to meet you."

"Others took it for granted, too, and I did not deny it—for Richard's sake."

"Is his name Richard?"

"Yes; Richard and Richardia. My father named us so, after a brother and sister of his own who were twins."

Tregarvon glanced at his watch. There were other things to be said—many of them, but a suddenly recrudescence of the fitness of things told him that the moment was unpropitious.

"I suppose I'll have to consider Hartridge and take him back to Highmount," he offered. Then he added quite irrelevantly: "He's in love with you, too. Speaking of accomplices, how much or how little did he have to do with the bush-whacking?"

"Nothing at all. It was only on the day of the explosion that he learned that Richard had come back, and was hiding with the McNabbs in the 'Pocket,' and heard, through Sill McNabb, that something was going to happen that night at your drilling plant. He suspected Richard at once, and went over to try to prevent the happening. Then your men caught Morgan McNabb,

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and Professor Billy hardly knew what to do. He guessed that Tryon had come over here after you and Mr. Carfax, and when you took father back with you he was afraid Morgan would be made to confess, and so make a bad matter infinitely worse. His idea in lighting the leaf fire was to give Morgan McNabb a chance to escape. Of course, he supposed the dynamite had been removed."

"It has been a tragedy of errors from the beginning," said Tregarvon soberly. "But I am going to expiate my part of it. Has Poictiers told you anything about my plans?"

"No."

"I made them while I was lying in bed in the old office-building at Coalville, trying to get well enough to crawl out and take hold with my hands. It came to me then what an egregious ass I had made of myself, all the way round. I had blundered in ahead of Poictiers and didn't have sense enough even to suspect it; and I had deliberately killed any little regard you might have had for me by showing myself up as a man who would make love to one woman while he was engaged to another. I was eaten up with shame, Richardia, and I am yet."

"It hurt me; I think you will never know how

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much it hurt," she said slowly. "A man asks utter and absolute loyalty of the woman he loves."

"And the woman can ask no less of the man, you would say. That is true. I am no defender of the double standard; still less an apologist for my sex. I have only one excuse, Richardia; it wasn't merely propinquity—as you and Poitiers seemed to think. I had never known what love was until I met you. Elizabeth is going to marry Poitiers, and you must believe me when I say that I think just as much of her—and in the same way—as I did before. But let that pass. I had found my coal mine, and had lost pretty nearly everything else, including my own self-respect. You were lost to me; doubly lost, as I thought then; so it seemed that the only thing for me to do was to set the Ocoee house in order, and after that was done to go away and try to forget."

"You are still meaning to go away?"

"Yes. I meant to stay long enough to make somebody suffer for the bushwhackings, but that is past. I have sent for Peters, our family lawyer, and when he comes we shall settle the property affair. Three-fifths of the stock in the mine will go to my mother and sister, and the remainder will be turned over to your father to be distributed

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among the Parker victims. This is what I have been meaning to do all along, if I should be fortunate enough to discover the coal."

She shook her head. "You are reckoning without my father. He won't take the money."

"He must be made to take it. It is only just and fair. When it comes to that, you must help me, Richardia; for his sake and for your brother's."

"Poor Dick!" she murmured. "He needs a friend much more than he needs the money; some one who would care enough for him to stand by and hold him up to the best there is in him. There *is* good in him; you may not believe it now, but there is, really—lots of it."

"I can very readily believe it, since he is your brother and the son of your father. And he has proved it to-night by climbing into the breach for McNabb. He will have his chance on the Ocoee, and Wilmerding will be his friend."

"Then you are determined to go away?"

"Yes. I owe it to you and to everybody else, not less than to myself. But some day, Richardia, after I have done penance for the sin of loving you before I had a right to I am coming back. But I had forgotten; your brother wished me to ask you to play for him; something that would

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drive the devil away. He said he wanted to think."

She went to the piano at once. Alone among the old-fashioned house furnishings it was modern; an artist's instrument, full-toned and responsive. Tregarvon sank into an armchair before the blazing logs and gave himself up to the quiet ecstasies of the music-lover. From the first her playing had stirred him as no other chamber-music ever had. For a time he knew that she was improvising; then there were gentle themes from Mendelssohn, shading one into another so deftly that he could never mark the changes. And at the last there was the Chopin nocturne.

While the closing chords of the night-song were still lingering in the air she came to sit in a chair at the opposite corner of the hearth.

"You played the Chopin for me; was that your way of telling me that I might come back some day, Richardia?" he asked quite humbly.

Her hands were clasped over one knee and her gaze was fixed upon the blue and yellow flames in the great fireplace, when she said softly: "You are very human—and very blind; so blind that you haven't seen that I have had to fight for two—for myself no less than for you. And there

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have been times when—when I almost *hated* Elizabeth!”

The Tregarvon blood was not sluggish; at least, he had never found it so before; but for the moment he was like a man stricken suddenly dumb. Then the gift of speech came back, laboring as it could in the turmoil of new ecstasies.

“*You had to fight for two; God help me, Richardia—if I had known that——*”

She rose quickly and came to stand beside his chair.

“If you had known it, you would have been the strong one, Vance, dear. I know it; I knew it all the time; but I—was afraid—to trust—myself. You are not going away, now, are you?”

There was the sound of an opening and closing door and the stumping of the professor's crutch on the bare floor of the hall. Tregarvon sprang up and took the small black-gowned figure in his arms.

“Going away?” he broke out passionately; “you couldn't drive me away with an axe! I'm going to stay forever, and let you make a complete man of me. We'll *marry* your father's share of the Ocoee back to him, and together we'll make a man of your brother. There are a million other

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things to say, but Hartridge is coming to look for his chauffeur and I must take him back to Highmount. Richardia—sweetheart! . . . If I don't wreck the car on the way it will be a miracle."

Very gently she disengaged herself. "You—you needn't smother a person," she protested, with the quaint little grimace that he loved. And then: "That is father, calling me to go to brother. Please heap some more coals of fire and be good to Professor Billy—for the sake of his loyalty to me and mine. . . . Yes, daddy, dear; I'm coming."

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